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Advisor: Olga Shevchenko
Advisor is Co-author: None of the above
Second Advisor:
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(No) Strings Attached: An Intersectional Lens on Race, Gender, and Emotions in College Hookup Culture

By
Grace Fan

Olga Shevchenko, Advisor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Sociology

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I wrote this for all the women and queer folks of infinite different colors who have felt as though their beauty and radiance were any less than the brightness and resilience they put out into the world.

I wrote this for those who have felt like the glow of their non-white, non-Western skin and features has been dimmed by the colonizers’ obsession with themselves and the power of their own whiteness.

I wrote this for the women of color who have to do everything right to survive and thrive—and even so, our perpetual distance from whiteness will always be a barrier to our ability to be recognized and seen.

I wrote this for those of us who gas ourselves up in the mirror every day to face a world that seeks to use us yet erase us, who hold each other up despite the way our migrations/identities/oppressions/diasporas give us different narratives and sufferings.

I wrote this for us.
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INTRODUCTION

Any outsider walking on a college campus will bear witness to students walking to and from class, working hard in the library, eating in the dining halls, and socializing with their friends in between. To the students who are privileged enough to attend a four-year college or university, college is framed as the best four years of their entire life— this is the common American narrative around higher education and is the trope that is commonly portrayed in the media and on TV. While the learning and day activities of college are what mainly motivates students’ desire to attend college, for many, weekend outings and night shenanigans— partying, alcohol, and casual sex— are also all things that are supposed make college the best years of one’s life. Nowadays, drunken late nights and college parties also lead to hookups— wild stories of sex with random strangers you will never talk to again (hopefully) and public physical intimacy with someone you wouldn’t choose unless you had maybe one shot too many.

At colleges and universities around the nation, a new kind of “no strings attached” intimacy has become a common feature of the social lives of students. No matter what kind of school or where it’s located, routinized expectations that students engage in casual fleeting sexual relationships permeate and shape many aspects of students’ lives, regardless of whether they choose to engage in hookup culture or not (Wade 2017). For some, hookup culture is liberating and allows students to explore their sexualities, bodies, and desires; for others, hookup culture has a dark underbelly that negatively impacts the way that they are able to navigate their lives on campus. For all, hookup culture has some role in their experience of college, even if they don't actively take part in it. Hookup culture’s pervasive influence over social life at schools across the nation gives it immense power to shape students’ lives, which is why it is a structure that should be understood, talked about, and interrogated critically.
The need for conversation is evident among students. At a talk at Williams in Spring 2019 on hookup culture, sex, and relationships on campus, there were about 40 or 50 students who attended—a rare turnout for a dinnertime weeknight event, particularly for a speaker who is not well-known. The students were tuned in and engaged, laughing along with the speaker as she told humorous stories of hookups gone wrong. What struck me about this event was how hungry students were to hear a middle-aged woman speak about the social world in which they were living. This event made the lack of analytical dialogue around hookup culture evident and thus exemplified a need for these kinds of conversations to happen beyond the Sunday brunch table or the regular private gossip session. Students seem to be itching to break the silence around hookup culture—while there are private discussions around hookup culture and weekend events, there is no community-wide dialogue that addresses the way hookup culture affects students. Thus far, campus communities have been too silent about this pervasive culture and its influences, despite its massive effects on social life. The newness of hookup culture has likely made it so colleges have not come to terms with this form of relationality that has taken over campuses across the nation.

With the expansion of discussion around creating better support systems for student mental health on college campuses, it is important to understand the ways that students are forming relationships, experiencing intimacy, and constructing a social self. Given this growth in awareness, thoroughly comprehending hookup culture is imperative, as this romantic regime creates rules and norms that are especially palpable given the insularity of campus communities. Furthermore, if hookup culture is causing pain and/or distress for students, particularly in the realm of relationship-building, then this could potentially be an avenue that feeds into the steep decline in student mental health on college campuses.
Additionally, it is necessary to study and talk about hookup culture, because sexual assault (both on college campuses and beyond) is at the forefront of public consciousness as communities work toward ending this all too common violence. A particular focus should be given to minoritized bodies—women of color, trans folks, queer people, etc.—because they face sexual violence at higher rates than people of other identities, as reported in studies done by End Rape on Campus and the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Study run by the U.S. Department of Justice. Though this paper is not principally concerned with the sexual violence or assault that happens so frequently on college campuses that it has become normalized, sexual assault is nested within and fueled by the structure of hookup culture. In many ways, the casual and transactional qualities of hookup culture facilitate rape culture on college campuses; thus, to understand and curb sexual violence, it is crucial to understand the systems and mentalities that allow it to exist. Further, the social structures and community norms around race, gender, and sexuality that perpetuate this kind of violence must be interrogated by the community to repair those who have been harmed.

Gender, Race, Emotional Capitalism, and Hookup Culture

Compared to the “going steady” dating culture that was predominant in the 20th century, hookup culture has a veneer of appearing progressive and liberating to college students, specifically to women (Heldman & Wade 2010). This liberal veneer seems to grant agency to college women, supposedly giving them the control over their sexuality and bodies through casual sex that was previously not accepted as part of dominant dating culture. Scholars who study hookup culture on campuses assert that, contrary to common belief and to what college students like to think, hookup culture may only continue to reinforce sexism in a different, less
conspicuous form, which only serves to make sexism more insidious and potent (Currier, 2013; Harris & Schmalz, 2016; Ronen, 2010; Wade 2017).

While the literature on hookup culture has been growing quickly in the past decade, it mostly focuses on white students who engage in this practice and neglects to address how this new sexual culture affects the lives of minority women. The research that currently exists shows that white students tend to engage with hookup culture more than other race or ethnic groups and that many people of color feel uncomfortable and marginalized by hookup culture (Wade 2017, 93). Thus, the aim of this present research is to employ an intersectional perspective on hookup culture and investigate how racism in addition to sexism interact to shape the experience of minoritized women with hookup culture.

Scholars have found that hookup culture can create a social environment on college campuses that privileges cisgender, straight men at the expense of the women who also enter those spaces (Harris & Schmalz, 2016; Helm, Gondra & McBride, 2015; Ronen, 2010; Wade, 2017). Hookup culture is centered around the use of bodies to fulfill a transaction for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Thus, the expectation for sex to operate separately from any emotional engagement inherently leads to the objectification of the body as an integral part of hookup culture (Wade 2017). Objectification is the process in which one internalizes an observer’s perspective as the predominant position with which they view their body and this is particularly characteristic of women’s perceptions of self in a patriarchal society (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Psychologists have uncovered that the gendered objectifying of one’s body is frequently associated with fake orgasming, feelings of helplessness, poor communication with a partner, and sexual dysfunction (Wade 2017, 199). These effects can be seen in women across the board and are much less present for men. Unfortunately, not enough literature exists about trans or
gender non-conforming people in hookup culture to compare them as well. While literature exists on the inequality of hookup culture in the way women are treated, my research broadens the scope to look particularly at how women’s sexualization is also deeply intertwined with race.

Social spaces on college campuses that are closely linked with hookup culture are fraternity parties, athlete parties, and off-campus houses. These places often create an atmosphere that gives men power to make value judgments about women and to see women in a utilitarian way, as objects to be used for sex (Harris & Schmalz, 2016). As a result, to receive validation from this dominant culture, women (much more than men) will frequently sexualize themselves to benefit within this script and acquire social capital from thriving within this environment (Harris & Schmalz, 2016). For instance, women will often wear less comfortable and more sexualized clothing (i.e. shirts that show cleavage, short skirts) with the intention to make their bodies more desirable to the male gaze at parties (Wade, 2017). Literature reveals that this is one mode through which hookup culture has vastly different expectations for women than men in a way that buttresses stereotypical societal understandings of gender through encouraging women’s self-objectification.

This self-objectification is often facilitated by labor that women go through to “improve themselves,” or labor that is performed so that they can appear closer to the ideal beauty standard. Wissinger coined the term “glamour labor,” which is labor that both targets the body and the image and “improv[es] one’s image by disciplining the body via diet, exercise, and medical intervention. It also encourages virtual forms of self-fashioning and self-surveillance made possible by Internet connectivity and social media” (Wissinger 2015, 3). Glamour labor is encouraged and fostered by the spread of capitalism into all forms of life, making “the maximization of lifestyle, potential, health, and quality of life...almost obligatory” (Wissinger
Wissinger wrote about the compulsory aspects of glamour labor— if one does not participate in this kind of self-fashioning and self-work, then they are seen as failing to optimize life. She claimed that “glamour labor varies, not just your wardrobe according to fashion, but also your body, your relationships, and your work styles, as you make your feelings, proclivities, and moods available” (2015, 6). Glamour labor plays a particular role in hookup culture, especially given the way that the hookup script is so deeply dictated by capitalism. This labor is an essential part of how hookup culture operates as a market because it directly contributes to success of the body in the market. Through the performance of glamour labor, women dress and prepare themselves so that their bodies are may be sufficiently attractive to function smoothly within the hookup script.

Thinking about this kind of labor and the use value of objectified bodies in this space offers a hint of how market principles shape hookup culture. Though people like to believe that relationships are exempt from the influences of capitalism, literature has increasingly indicated that this is simply untrue and that relationality is intimately wedded to the market. Eva Illouz writes about this in *Why Love Hurts*, as she deconstructs the way that power and capital operate in the struggle for love, sex, and desire. Her book aims to “to understand institutional causes for romantic misery and also point out that the experience of love exerts a powerful hold that can’t be explained by ‘false consciousness,’” with one of her main points being that “love circulates in a marketplace of unequal competing actors” (2011, 6). Though Illouz never writes explicitly about hookup culture, many of the claims that she made are applicable to hookup culture, particularly the way that rationality has replaced intuition and embodied knowledge in regards to relationality and love. This change is largely due to the infusion of economic reason (i.e. instrumental rationality) into the way people approach desire; as a result, people’s emotional
lives and senses of self are deeply affected by the way they perform in the market that love, sex, and romance have become.

According to Illouz, modern people are commitment-averse, connecting “commitment phobia” to “a cultural performance around the problem of choice” (2011, 90). This problem of choice can be seen in people’s approaches to intimacy. Such approaches look remarkably similar to the concept of consumer choice, which is “a culturally specific category of choice, exercised through a combination of rational deliberation, refinement of taste, and the desire to maximize utilities and well-being” (Illouz 2011, 91). With more options available, given the increased connectivity that the Internet and dating apps/sites provide, people have the possibility to undertake an extensive information-gathering process as a way to attain the best possible partner. In a similar vein, hookup culture follows this rational train of thought, as busy students and young adults who are pursuing careers favor rationality over the formation of meaningful relationships because relationship-building may detract from career ambitions, schoolwork, future financial stability, and the general navigation of the inundating stimuli that modern college life presents. Ultimately, neoliberal and increased choice are seen as a positive development but also act as modalities of constraint. My research not only looks at choice and commitment, but also analyzes the aspects of college life that may be causing students to be relationship-averse and how the overwhelming number of possibilities at hand may be deterring people from pursuing intimacy.

Arlie Hochschild’s work on capitalism’s intersection with people’s frameworks for understanding of emotion is also pertinent to the effects that hookup culture has on young adults. Her book, The Managed Heart, is a pioneering inquiry into how the systems that dictate the way people feel are infused with market principles. Like Hochschild, I am interested in investigating
the commercialization of human feeling. Unlike Illouz, Hochschild’s work engages how market logic influences the interactional dynamics of emotional life through ideas such as emotion management. Capitalism incentivizes people to control their feelings through emotional labor and emotion management/work, which is “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display—in a private context they have a use value” (Hochschild 1983, 7). My work differs from Hochschild’s because it focuses on private life and not a public work setting. Furthermore, using Hochschild’s concept of “emotion work,” the present research looks at what emotion management is happening within the hookup script through terms such as “catching feelings” and the awkward post-hookup brunch scenario.

“Hookup,” The Term

Hookup culture on college campuses refers to the patterns of behavior and nature of how people seek casual sexual activity. A “hookup” encompasses a variety of sexual activities, ranging from kissing to oral sex and penetrative sex, and occurs outside of and with no intention to pursue a traditional monogamous relationship (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether 2012). The terminology of “hookup” surfaced in academia during the 1990s with its examination in the context of Greek life on college campuses. Despite its widespread presence on college campuses, previous research has found that “hooking up” is generally hard to define (Garcia et al. 2012; Currier 2013; Wade 2017). Currier explained that there is “strategic ambiguity” around how a hookup is actually defined depending on the identity of the person who uses the term. Her findings showed that men and women used “hookup” to cater to their respective gender stereotypes, with women using it to downplay their sexual activity, and men employing it to exaggerate their sexual prowess. In attempts to adhere to the double standard of not being overly sexual but simultaneously not sexually restricted, women use the ambiguity of “hookup” to
appeal to hegemonic ideas of femininity and avoid revealing what sexual activities they have engaged in. In contrast, men use “hookup” as an appeal to their masculinity and as social currency with their fellow male peers to imply that they are having sex when they may not be having penetrative sex (Currier 2013). The use of language in hookup culture is scripted differently for women and men, exemplifying how gender determines how individuals are able to engage with hookup culture.

Scholars have noted that hookup culture has replaced a dating culture centered around the monogamous, heterosexual dating pair (Bogle 2007). From the 1920s to the 1960s, dating was a given in the college experience—collegiate social life often entailed events that focused on a dating couple. Traditional dating from the 20th century entailed going out on dates (perhaps with multiple people over the same period of time), without an expectation of sexual intimacy. Given this, if sexual intimacy were present in the relationship it would progress relatively slowly and match the level of emotional intimacy (Bogle 2007). With the sexual revolution in the 1960s, views on sex and intimacy changed and along with that came a new dating script that was more focused on young adults meeting at parties and bars (Strouse 1987). Hookup culture began to form, manifesting in the normalization of people having sexual relations outside of monogamous relationships. At the same time, there was a political shift toward neoliberalism, putting a strong emphasis on individualism instead of community dependence. Nowadays, people who hook up do not necessarily go on dates with one another and, at times, do not even know each other’s names (Bogle 2007). However, it is important to note that college students have long engaged in sexual explorations and one-night stands, but it was only until recently that the sexual climate on college campuses began adopting hooking up as the norm, the goal, and the only form of intimacy readily available to students.
State of the “Union”

Dating culture has little place on campus today—college students acknowledge dating culture, but choose not to engage it as it is not the popular way to meet people (Bogle 2007). With the retirement of “going steady” dating culture, the hookup scene at institutions of higher learning has blossomed into the default way for students to navigate intimacy—through non-committal, temporary sexual encounters (Heldman & Wade 2010). Recent studies have shown that 60-80% of college students in North America have at least some sort of hookup experience (Garcia et al. 2012). Hookup culture’s focus on the pursuit of sex and fulfillment of desire dictates the way that people interact with one another on college campuses, allowing students to access sex without having their career and life aspirations be hindered by the “burden” of emotional intimacy (Garcia et al. 2012). However, if casual sex is meaningless then everything other than emotionless sex is seen as meaningful by students (i.e. holding hands, cuddling, acts of tenderness, etc.) (Wade 2017). Further, students have reported that even not having sex is more intimate than having sex—withholding from having sex often signals that that the relationship is more than just a casual hookup. Wade also found that to avoid allowing space for any emotion in a hookup situation, students will completely disengage from one another, going from being maximally physically intimate one night to essentially ignoring one another on campus (2017, 12).

At many schools, hookup culture and party culture act as structures that can reinforce practices of sexism (Currier 2013; Harris & Schmalz 2016; Wade 2017). As hookup culture is derived from and centralized around Greek life, many studies have been conducted around hookup culture specifically in fraternity culture (Boyle & Walker 2016; Harris & Schmalz 2016; Wade 2017). When students attend parties, they usually expect to have a good time, drink
heavily, and also hook up with someone (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006). Fraternities and sororities are often the hosts of these parties; thus, Greek life scenes can operate as a hub for hookup culture. Sexism seeps into the walls of the fraternity party structure, in the sense that fraternities often promote social norms that can be used to categorize women and evaluate them for the fulfillment of their sexual desires (Boyle & Walker 2016; Harris & Schmalz 2016; Wade 2013). In their study, Harris and Schmalz (2015) indicated that parties are often used to socially categorize women and reinforce conventional gender roles, through the act of including or excluding women from the party space.

Yet, Harris and Schmalz (2015) explain that this does not negate the fact that women ultimately have to adhere to oppressive behavioral norms and self-objectification to be included in the environment and attain social benefits, as men dictate the rules of a social space given their institutional power both in the fraternity and in society at large. One example of the gendered norms in hookup culture is the way women tend to be intensely preoccupied with their appearance and whether they are presentable enough to be pursued (Wade 2017). In contrast, men discuss which women they deem worthy enough of their attention. Women often worry about whether their bodies are fit enough and outfits are attractive enough, whereas men put much less effort into their appearance. These thoughts fuel college women’s tendency to put more effort into preparing for parties and to wear more revealing or tighter clothes for parties whereas it is normal for men to arrive at parties wearing average street clothes (Wade 2017).

Race and Hookup Culture

Race is a key part of hookup culture, but it is often overlooked in favor of analyzing gender. However, as Crenshaw points out in her work on “intersectionality,” systems of power (i.e. race, gender, class, etc.) do not exist separate from one another, but rather intermingle to
impact the way that women of color (and black women, in particular) interact with the world. Research reveals that hookup culture in its current state is dependent upon norms that harm women and have a particular effect on women of color. *American Hookup*, Wade’s book, is one of the first examples of scholarship that illuminates the ways people of color experience hookup culture differently from their white peers. For example, this asymmetry is present in the structure of the “erotic marketplace,” in hookup culture. The erotic marketplace is a hierarchy of sexual desirability, with white men and women positioned at the top while people of color fall underneath in categories: Black men and Asian women underneath white students but toward the top and black women, Middle Eastern, and Asian men falling at the bottom. In her ethnographic and interview data, students of color expressed feeling disadvantaged by this hierarchy and their inherent inability to attain the conventional white standard of beauty. Many students of color reported feeling like they were not considered as potential sexual partners by their peers: they would go to parties but find themselves ignored by other partygoers (Wade 2017). My study seeks to understand these feelings more deeply and to understand how these experiences unfold and occur in party and/or hookup spaces.

White students at institutions of higher education tend to hook up more frequently than students of all other races, as party spaces are created to accommodate for people who fit the white, heterosexual, economically-privileged demographic and tend to ostracize those who do not (Wade 2017). What’s more, research suggests that racial stereotypes are often projected upon people of color who choose and are able to enter party spaces, with black men and East Asian/American women being seen as hypersexualized by white, cisgender men while East Asian/American’s term coined by David Palumbo-Liu in his book *Asian/American* to give those whose present positionality is informed by the Asian diaspora some agency in what identity they wish to choose while giving both labels equal status.
Asian/American men and South Asian/American women are viewed as sexually inept (Chou 2012). These images stem from a sexual hierarchy that is defined by white hegemonic perspectives and defines how people of color navigate hookup culture and intimate relationships in general (Chou 2012; Wade 2017). The racialized sexual stereotypes around people’s bodies form and reinforce the sexual hierarchy that determines the way people, both white and non-white, approach non-white bodies.

However, the existing literature does not address the emotional well-being of women of color (and people of color in general) in hookup spaces. In fact, one could argue that research designs have specifically not focused on women of color and minoritized people at large; therefore, limited to no systematic analysis of racial differences in hookup culture is able to take place. With the rise of sexuality as a center of social life and mainstream measure of self-worth, it is evident that emotions, well-being, and health are all at stake through hookup encounters. The limited research that exists mentions that people of color are disproportionately disadvantaged by this script, but presents this as a tangential or even tokenistic point with no elaboration. Given this, it is crucial that the emotional effects of this structure of relationality are documented and investigated.

**Methodology**

For this study, I interviewed 21 women who were either current Williams College students or Williams alumni. Of my sample size, 18 were women of color and three were white women. Additionally, 10 participants self-identified as queer or a non-straight sexual orientation and 11 identified as straight. In terms of age, 13 women were current and/or recently graduated (within one year) students and 8 were alumni (ranging from Class of 2017 to Class of 2014). I recruited my participants through posts on Facebook and Instagram and also did snowball
sampling at the end of each interview, asking my participants who they might think would be interested in sharing their experiences with me. Each interview was about an hour long (the shortest being around 45 minutes and the longest around an hour and a half) and were in a location of the participant’s choice, often a coffee shop or a cafe. As compensation, I offered to pay for a coffee and/or a pastry for the participant. All of my interviews were consensual and were also recorded with consent. They were then transcribed through Descript software. These semi-structured interviews provided deeper insight into things that I had already been observing on the Williams campus, as a student of the College for the past four years.

This senior thesis was, in many ways, a passion project— as a woman of color on the Williams College campus, I experienced and witnessed so many ways in which hookup culture influenced the personal lives of people I care about and myself. Having spent four years stewing in these feeling rules, norms, and habitus, I felt compelled to academically investigate why the patterns I was observing in my social life kept emerging year after year, friend after friend. However, I fully acknowledge that my proximity to this topic makes this both methodologically difficult for me and also questionable under the gaze of the white scholars who have deemed objectivity as necessary to legitimate sociological scholarship. In this paper, I have sought to make space for my interlocutors’ experiential knowledge as well as my own, giving light to topics that are not normally highlighted in academic literature. I identify as a Taiwanese-American (of Han Chinese descent), straight, ciswoman who personally has little experience partaking in hookup culture myself, but has nonetheless been steeped in its dramas and expectations throughout my time at Williams and have observed its effects from the periphery. My identities as a woman of color make it so this topic feels particularly urgent to me, especially given my attachments to other people on this campus.
My project is mainly focused on race because of limitations of space, however, if given the opportunity, I would have looked more closely at the intersections of queerness, ableism, class, etc. with hookup culture (and race), as these effects are often overlooked in the literature that exists about hookup culture as well. Particularly because half of my interview sample is queer women, I wish I had more of a capacity to understand queer hookup culture (especially because there is so little research on it). I personally have seen the ways in which minoritized identities of all kinds have been further pushed to the margins by the hookup culture script and have faced the repercussions of that exclusion.

To achieve decolonize discipline and to shift the center of sociology from white voices who have always been given the microphone in academia, more narratives about people of color written by people of color must be shared. Sociology and its close cousin, anthropology, have historically been involved in histories of colonial and imperial violence and to rewrite this narrative and reputation moving forward (while also not erasing or forgetting problematic histories), it is important to create space for a focus on the experiences of minoritized people. In the correct context and location, sociology can be an incredibly powerful tool to analyze the current injustices in the world and also to fuel social change. This is what my work attempts to achieve.

Outline

In Chapter 1, I explain the basic ins and outs of hookup culture, with a particular focus on how things operate on the Williams College campus. The chapter explains the typical arc of hookups from the preparation necessary for a night out, to a play-by-play of a party, to brunch the next morning. To understand what hookup culture is, it is important to understand a hookup in relationship to the romantic regime that preceded it (i.e. dating). In this project, I will use
Polina Aronson’s term, “romantic regime” to encompass the current structure of romantic relationality that is in place. Aronson defines this as “systems of emotional conduct that affect how we speak about how we feel, determine ‘normal’ behaviours, and establish who is eligible for love – and who is not” (2015). Chapter 2 discusses hookup culture through the lens of the sociology of emotion, analyzing feeling rules and the norms for emotion management that it necessitates. The emotional and relational conventions of hookup culture are shaped by capitalism and our political economy; thus, this chapter analyzes the ways in which market principles are infused into hookup culture. Chapter 3 takes an intersectional approach to hookup culture, investigating how race and gender interact with one another to influence the way that women of color engage with hookup culture. In all, this thesis seeks to explain how the structure of hookup culture on the Williams campus and how women of color in particular are affected by the whims of this romantic regime emotionally. The current research wishes to deeply investigate how the emotional lives of women of color are impacted by the hookup culture script and their ability (or lack thereof) to participate in it.
CHAPTER I: A RUNDOWN OF HOOKUP CULTURE

Every year a small liberal arts college in the middle of nowhere hosts a traditional, annual series of three dances for the senior class called: First Chance, 100 Days, and Last Chance. The names subtly give the intentions of the dances away—“First Chance” is named this way because it’s supposedly the first last chance you have to meet your future Williams spouse. It is a well-known fact on campus that Williams boasts a ridiculously high marriage rate— rumor has it 40-60%\(^2\) of Williams alumni end up marrying one another, whether they dated at Williams or (re)kindled a love at a Williams reunion. Granted, this may as well be an urban myth. Over the years, First Chance has deviated from its original meaning to fit within the current framework of relationality that the College now operates under—instead of finding your spouse, First Chance (and dances of its like) is a great place to find people you may not otherwise encounter at your regular weekend party spaces to have a one-night stand, which is part of the draw to these events for many students.

During First Chance at Paresky Center (the student center) this past fall, the lights were accidentally flicked on briefly in the middle of the dance, flailing sweaty bodies abruptly stopped their trajectory of motion and everyone was left standing still while complaining, loudly and drunkenly. People pulled away from the people they had moments ago been locking lips with, stepping back mid-make out. I was, by chance, not on the dance floor at the time and was able to watch the space devolve into chaos for a moment, as people were flustered, confused, and unable to ensue shenanigans as usual because of newly gained visibility. Activation of the lights made people suddenly aware of their own behaviors, which seemed to occur in conditions devoid of clarity, and this realization prompted an adverse reaction. The lights transformed Baxter Hall

\(^2\) This statistic has been thrown around by tour guides and JAs, two positions that are ingrained within the institutional structure of the College.
from its temporary party form to its normally lit, shiny wood-surfaced space, cueing a completely different behavior than the one that was occurring moments before.

Having the lights off means people can, for a night, forget the normal slog of Williams life, but having the lights on indicates that people must return to the ways of being that are so familiar and so normally tied with work and productivity during the week. People stopped dancing, stopped their making out, stopped whatever drunken behaviors would not be seen as socially acceptable in the light. Under the veil of darkness, people felt free to be in their bodies and act upon their unmediated, drunken desires, whether it’s moving their bodies in ways that are not socially acceptable in daylight or interacting with other people in ways much more forward than sober, well-lit spaces allow.

First Chance shows how hookup culture is seemingly written into the social structure of the College and how the institution makes deliberate steps to manufacture and shape its students’ romantic and social lives. Further, this particular moment at First Chance indicates how hooking up is both a public and private act, thriving in a public party though necessitating darkness. The act of turning the lights on mid-party renders seemingly invisible behaviors as visible, forcing students to acknowledge their drunken behaviors with a spotlight through disrupting the normal conditions of a party or hookup space.

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What is a Hookup?

Asking participants to define or describe a hookup produces many varying answers—ranging from a dance floor make-out (DFMO) to going back to someone’s room and having penetrative sex. The term ‘hookup’ can encompass many interactions of different weights and meanings. For example, a person can have sex with a stranger or make out with an old friend
whom they know intimately—these both could be defined as a hookup. Kathleen Bogle in *Hooking Up* explained, “you cannot be sure precisely what someone means when he or she reports having ‘hooked up’ unless you ask a follow-up question to see how much sexual activity took place (2008, 25). Grace, a Korean American alumnus who identifies as queer, describes the common confusion that is often accompanied with the task of defining a hookup, saying,

> So the definition of hooking up by itself is very like ambiguous, right? Some people think that it has to involve sex, even though sex in itself is also ambiguous. My definition is kind of more broad in that...it doesn't have to involve sex necessarily if you just like kissing.

Lisa Wade, in her book *American Hookup*, stated that the Online College Social Life Survey found that 40% of hookups include intercourse, 13% stop at oral sex (which was specified as mostly women performing oral sex on men), 12% of hookups include only foreplay (i.e. nudity and genital touching), and 35% of hookups consist of only open-mouth kissing and touching (2017, 40).

> Despite the ambiguity that exists within hookups, the one unanimously agreed upon hallmark of a hookup is that it exists solely for the pursuit of sex and physical pleasure. Wade puts it succinctly saying, “the purpose of the hookup, however, is the opposite of ambiguous…[it’s] ‘fast, random, no-strings-attached sex’” (2017, 41). The only truly predictable quality of a hookup is that it does not operate within the context of a romantic relationship—there is no commitment involved (though this is often hard to mutually maintain). Depending on who is hooking up, there can be a range of pretext from complete strangers to close friends. Evidently, the two people involved just want to engage in physical intimacy with one another that is not contingent upon other forms of intimacy (emotional, mental, etc.) nor expected to lead to other forms of intimacy past the physical.

**How Does a Hookup Happen?**
A common play-by-play as reported to me and as I have experienced it goes like this (reported from the perspective of woman-identifying individuals, as that was the sample population that I interviewed):

Start the night with a shower. Prepare your body to feel good—shave, clean yourself, put on a full face of makeup, and an outfit that makes you feel good, sexy, confident. For many, this looks like tight black jeans or leggings with a tank top of some sort. Parties are hot (temperature-wise) so minimal clothing is often a smart, practical choice aside from a person’s desire to fit what fashion trends deem attractive. Once everyone is ready, friends will gather at the pregame, consuming their choice of drink for the night while loud music bumps off the walls of someone’s common room. People take synchronized shots with friends from a cheap bottle of liquor. While everyone is chatting, people are also figuring out what is coming next—do they go to one of the rare (but formerly frequent) school-sanctioned dance parties, a function held by one of the campus’s affinity groups, or a house on Hoxsey Street (the street where the football, soccer, frisbee, and many other teams live)? As soon as everyone reaches a sufficient level of inebriation, people energetically file out of the common room, headed to the next destination and into whatever the night holds.

What people often excitedly call a “lit” party—a paradoxical and ironic word to use, as most “lit” parties are physically dark—is often just a space where people are packed from wall to wall, sweaty bodies jostling up drunkenly against other sweaty bodies. Some folks may be attempting to dance but frequently (and if a party is truly “lit”) there is little room to move your body more than a simple head bobbing, arm raising, and/or vertical hopping. This kind of movement sets the scene for a hookup to emerge—the forced close proximity, everyone’s drunkenness, and loud music all set the scene for people to approach someone.
Approaching someone may come in many forms. The two most common ones are as follows: one party may decide to dance with the person they have been eyeing or, alternatively, two people may find themselves in a conversation with each other off in a corner where they can actually hear each other speak. However, hearability is usually necessitated upon people getting close to one another, and closely talking in each other’s ears. The dancing approach may or may not include conversation—often, this will be initiated by one person (in a heterosexual interaction, it is often the male-identifying individual) who will occasionally dance on women wordlessly without asking for consent. Men may assume that you gave them consent by just being near them, but this obviously does not warrant consent. At some point, one of the people in this interaction may ask if the other wants to leave the party, which translates to “do you want to leave this public space so we can hook up in private?”

In my understanding of a hook up, spending the night together post-hookup is often equated with commitment or some sort of emotional intimacy that is usually avoided in a one-night stand. With someone you are unfamiliar with, you would likely leave their room at the end of the exchange, returning back to the comfort of your own bed alone. If it’s a repeated hookup, spending the night would be more usual. Everything is expected to be completely casual and non-monogamous unless talked about—if something has gone on long enough, the two parties will often have a “what are we?” conversation in which they negotiate the terms of their relationship.

The next morning, many things may ensue. On Williams’ small campus, it is not entirely unlikely that you may run into the person you hooked up with the previous night. Alternatively, you may never see this person again, which is the hope in the case of a one-night stand. This event is often anxiety-inducing for people in anticipation for awkwardness or even lack of
acknowledgement. These moments can range from a small, tense exchange of closed-mouth smiles, to a warm conversation, or no acknowledgement at all. Many people have horror stories about “the next day” and not being acknowledged by the person they hooked up with the night before despite, just hours before, having been deeply intimate with that person.

**Hooking Up: A Play-by-Play**

1. Preparation

It became evident through my interviews that there was a distinct ritual that these women would go through to prepare for a night out. For some, getting ready was a sacred practice full of group affirmations and elaborate makeup routines; for others, it was just something they knew it was expected of them before they showed up for a party. One of the questions I asked my participants was, “how do you typically prepare for a night out?” For those who frequented parties, the answer often revolved around a regular routine in which these women would prepare their bodies for a party by cleaning, shaving, doing elaborate making up, and dressing properly so that they can feel good. This good feeling often also intersects with a look that allows them to have maximum sex appeal. In a majority of my interviews, the most consistent player in the party process is the male gaze. For heterosexual women, the male gaze is not only present at the party but also in preparing for the party. However, even before one has arrived at that point, the internalized male gaze invokes a gendered (and sometimes racialized) form of W.E.B. DuBois’s double consciousness (1903, 2). This manifests as an internalized male gaze, which is connected more broadly to neoliberal control of women through encouraging and even mandating self-regulation. This means that women, when preparing themselves for the party, are most likely
thinking about how men will view them when they get dressed, put on makeup, get drunk, etc.

For example, Ella said:

There is definitely a part of [hookup] culture that incentivizes people to dress a certain way when they are going to be in a public scene because they want to…assimilate into...looking a certain way to be desired.

Through my observations, the typical ‘going out’ outfit includes a tank and/or crop top with tight bottoms (i.e. shorts, leggings, jeans) and comfortable shoes, like boots or canvas sneakers (specifically white sneakers). If the top isn’t a tank top, it’s something tight, cropped, and/or slightly more exposing than something someone would wear to class or to a meeting with their professor.

Make up is bolder, lipstick is brighter, perfume is stronger. Everything is a little more enhanced for a night out, which takes extra time and effort. Peaches talked about this during her interview:

I usually shower before I go out, wash my face and do new makeup and I usually will take longer on my makeup, I’ll do more of a full face...I love to pamper myself and do makeup and, you know, do my eyeliner really nice and thick because it’s going to be dark. I always wear big hoops when I go out and I usually wear the same thing. I’ll wear jeans and a black tank top because it’s simple and I’ll wear some shoes.

Ann echoed Peaches explaining that she, “put[s] some makeup on, typical womanly things, I guess. I put makeup on— try to look really cute.” Ann’s explanation was interesting because she explicitly referred to her gender as something she was intentionally trying to bring out as she got ready to go out. This performance of gender was echoed by Tina, who described how she prepared for a night out:

I'll put on party jeans— *laughs* I don't have a specific pairs probably any pair of jeans that are clean for the day and then a tank top and some makeup and meet up with friends, have some rosé or something, and giggle our way over to a party, hang out with the same friends.

Anna explained her night in more depth than others, saying:
So like I start getting like have dinner at like six to seven. Go back home, maybe like hang out with my girls for like half an hour and then it's like ‘okay like time to ask around and see... what is happening on campus that night amongst our different friend groups.’ By eight, we've hopefully decided where we're like going that night so we shower and like get dressed, do our makeup and that usually is all done by like 9:30 to 10:30, it'll be the pregame to then rush to wherever we're going because we know that we're only going to be there until 1:15 at latest so that we are able to get spots at the snack bar line before they close.

Going out to a party evidently takes careful and deliberate preparation, women do not just happen to find themselves at a party, as there is an unspoken dress code— it is rare that someone would show up to a hot, sticky party in, for example, sweatpants and a sweater. In contrast, however, men are able to show up in their normal day/street clothes and that would be seen as appropriate. Wade explains this for campuses with social scenes centered around fraternities:

> Sexy costume themes reward women for revealing and provocative clothes, stratify them and put them into competition, all while reminding them that it's their job to make parties sexy. In contrast, men are rarely, if ever, expected to dress in ways that present their bodies to women for evaluation...they [wear] 'normal streetwear clothing' to the beach party. (2017, 195)

Though Wade’s excerpt refers specifically to costume parties, interviewee responses and literature show that investing time into preparing oneself for a party is a distinctly gendered thing, with women spending more time and energy to adhere to the implicit dress code of parties whereas men do not have as much of a pressure to look a certain way for parties. The standard for what is “presentable” proves to be drastically different for women than for men. This also is evident through how women talk about the ‘walk of shame,’ which is the journey one takes the next morning to walk home from the location of last night’s hookup. Bogle explained,

> Style of dress varies significantly between the daytime and nighttime, so that it is obvious to onlookers if someone is still in their night time wear. Interestingly, women seemed more concerned with the walk of shame than their male counterparts. (2008, 35)

Women report hating the walk of shame more than men most likely because of how their outfits can easily be read as “going out” clothes or street clothes, whereas men don’t have to deal with
that discrepancy. The legibility of outfits the next morning consequently elicits feelings of embarrassment and shame for women, which is also fueled by the social stigma around sexually active and/or promiscuous women. As a result, the walk of shame is more shameful for women than for men. This phenomenon produces an emotional contradiction between what hookup culture promises: unemotional, purely functional sex.

The gendered difference in how people approach parties makes the power dynamics within these spaces clear. Why is there a dress code for only woman-identifying folks? Who is the show for? In the heavily cisgender, heterosexual realms that these parties are, women transform into objects of pleasure for men in those spaces. With the expectation for women to dress up for a night out, the power dynamics become clear—though both parties must accept one another for a hookup to occur, men are the evaluators and thus hold the power in these spaces. However, women do not necessarily see their experiences this way and most likely opt for a postfeminist view of empowerment, one in which women feel liberated through their ability to feel sexy (Gill, 2016). This form of empowerment is superficial at best, with white men still being those who define what “sexy” means and looks like. Wade also explains the presence of this power dynamic in parties, with her participant reporting that “the goal is to look ‘fuckable’” (2017, 27). But “fuckable” to whom? Here, the presumed observer(s) is the men at the party whom Wade’s informant wants to view her as someone worth having sex with. Thus, it is understood by most heterosexual women entering that space that men are to be the evaluators of whether their transformation and preparation is successful enough to get them laid that night.

1. Pregame

Once people are dressed and ready, folks will then ‘pregame’ the main party or event with their close friends in preparation for that night’s festivities. Pregaming is exactly what it sounds like—the event before the event, a casual gathering building up to the “real” night out.
However, a few folks said that pregaming can be the best part of the night. It was certainly the case for Peaches:

I always pregame with close friends of mine that are women of color and that's probably the most fun part... is pre-gaming and playing music we want to play and prepping ourselves and hyping each other up. And then it kind of doesn't matter where we go after that because we're already so hype and having a good time that it could be kind of a whack party but we're still going to enjoy it and I find that that's my outlet from the week ago during the week.

At Williams, pregaming happens in people’s common rooms or homes with a small group of close friends. The sole purpose of pregames is to boost your experience for the rest of the night. This involves drinking, since, as Wade puts it, “party-oriented students believe that drinking enhances their experience” (2017, 29). Alcohol acts as an important agent for nearly all hegemonic parties and hookups. Thomas Vander Van in his book, Getting Wasted, writes that “many of [his] respondents made it clear that a major benefit of being intoxicated was that it gave them the temporary nerve to approach, talk to, and flirt with members of the opposite sex. Getting drunk was seen as a necessary prerequisite for seeking sexual or romantic companionship” (2011, 64). Though this is an antiquated way of framing gender and sexuality, the sentiment around alcohol remains the same.

Through my interviews as well, it was clear that people go out to parties in anticipation of finding someone to hook up with, sometimes strangers, sometimes people they have been in conversation with for a few days, weeks, months. Though not all hookups stem from alcohol-heavy parties, the dominant narrative always involves alcohol as a main player. Only 2 of all my 21 interviews were devoid any mention of the words “drink,” “drunk,” “alcohol,” or “pregame.” Despite my never asking the interviewee explicitly about alcohol or drinking, alcohol remained a prominent underlying player in the interviews and often times a necessity to people’s pre-party ritual. In an article by The New York Times from 2013 about sex on college campuses, “women
said universally that hookups could not exist without alcohol, because they were for the most part too uncomfortable to pair off with men they did not know well without being drunk.”

Additionally, in Wade’s *American Hookup*, she wrote that “the first step in hooking up is to get…‘shitfaced’” (2017, 29) because students believe that their inebriated selves are “freer, more relaxed, less anxious, and generally more fun to be around.” Therefore, the pregame is an essential part of a successful night— alcohol makes it more likely for a person to have fun in spaces that may be uncomfortable or awkward sober and allows socializing to be less inhibited.

Alcohol is intimately tied to these scripts of hookup culture and how one arrives to a hookup. Many view alcohol as an agent that allows folks to do things and act in ways that they would normally lack the courage to do. For example, Peaches said in her interview that people at Williams are “awkward and don't know how to interact” but “when they're drunk [they] are really friendly and like I'll interact with some people who normally during the day would be too shy to say hi to me or like wouldn't interact with me.” With alcohol in a person’s system, it is easier to do things that scary, such as saying ‘hi’ to someone you don’t know or making a move on someone you have been eying on the dance floor. Charlotte said that hookups for her have mostly arisen “from being drunk...almost every hook up I feel like I had I was intoxicated for, which is just not great. I wasn’t super drunk, maybe had a drink or two and I was out and about, waiting for a text or texting someone to hang out.” Janelle commented on this too, saying:

> I think there's a huge part of hookup culture that is defined by drinking and alcohol, which is bad because...I think as I said before that because Williams was so small you don't want to ask someone out sober and get rejected. So if you drunkenly hook up with them, there's a way in which it can be erased if it needs to be, which is horrible and like obviously there are so many issues.

As Janelle explained, people use alcohol both as an excuse and as a protection mechanism— alcohol removes meaning from people’s actions; therefore, if someone does something reckless or irresponsible, alcohol can act as their scapegoat for their behaviors and if someone is rejected
or is made uncomfortable, alcohol acts as the bandaid to prevent any real harm from happening to the individual. Wade also discussed this, framing alcohol as useful:

....because [it] is liquid courage; [and] it also frames the sexual activity, boxing it into the realm of meaninglessness...it’s how students show that they are being careless in both senses of the word: they aren’t being careful and they don’t care. If students are being careless, they can’t be held responsible for what they did, but neither can they be held accountable for who they did. (2017, 45)

Wade’s logic here indicates that college students are careless and reckless precisely because they do not care, or perhaps a correction here may be that people behave in the way that they do because they are supposed to not care, but do care.

The explicit attempt to make something meaningless through drunkenness means that, by nature, more is at stake in hookup culture than people are willing to admit—emotionally, physically, socially. Evidently, the necessity for alcohol to enable these spaces and these types of interactions indicates how a hookup itself is not inherently meaningless, as college students tend to believe, but rather requires an artificial protection to shield people from the various vulnerabilities that are at stake in hookup culture. Alcohol is not simply a by-product of or a supporting actor in hegemonic hookup culture, but is rather the active tool that attempts to construct meaninglessness within it. In some cases, if someone consumes enough to black out, then they literally cannot take responsibility for their actions nor will they recall them the day after. After all, approaching someone includes the potential of being rejected and being naked in front of someone you hardly know inherently makes a person vulnerable during physical intimacy. Alcohol renders a person’s actions blurry and not thought out; thus, if any errors are made, drunkenness acts as an excuse for one’s potentially questionable behaviors.

2. The Party

Parties are a gaze-heavy space. From my participant observation, the game seems to be whether or not the person you want to lock eyes with will also lock eyes with you and dark party
spaces are the court. The space is filled with a web of sightlines, some fall unreciprocated while others buzz with tension and potential. At parties, gazes are charged with meaning and feelings of lust, desire, longing, loneliness. Repeated gaze signals interest much more explicitly than spaces one would occupy during the day like the library or the dining hall, however, these practices still persist there as well. Every single person at the party, no matter their gender, seems to be constantly on the prowl for their target for the night. At any given party, people are constantly swiveling to look around at the people who surround them— unless in conversation or completely absorbed in dancing, heads turn and eyes wander either to keep tabs on a potential person of interest or in search of that person of interest. If gazes are met, it’ll likely culminate into at least an approach and often a conversation.

Gazes can function as fuel for someone to garner enough confidence to approach a person. If one’s gaze has been reciprocated enough times, it’s as though (what I imagine as) the “gaze tank” fills up and a person may feel as though they are ready to embark on an approach. However, reciprocity isn’t required for one to feel emboldened to approach another person—sometimes alcohol is simply enough. Alcohol can make people feel like they have reason to approach someone and it isn’t important to gauge signifiers of mutual interest beforehand. Approaching another person could look like physically moving one’s body so that the two parties are closer to one another, introducing oneself, or just chatting with them. Tina talked about this, as she recalled the build up to one of her hookup experiences:

I guess there's one instance I'm thinking of where I was like sitting with this guy on a couch and like just chatting but it starts getting flirty you like moving the sort of closer consciously sometimes, sometimes unconsciously and... We were getting a little touchy and then we just kind of stick for the rest of, you know, however long we were at the party and then headed out walking together and like go to one person's place or another and it seemed like fairly natural at that point. We'd had a good interaction thus far and we just continued hanging out together...[until] we were in his room.
As seen here, a sustained conversation throughout the night signals interest—physical proximity (either through placement of bodies and/or touchiness during conversation) is an added bonus and further evidence of a person’s possible interest. In contrast, Bogle wrote that “lack of eye contact, looking around the room while someone was talking, or moving on to mingle with others were deemed obvious indicators of lack of interest in hooking up” (2007, 33).

At dance parties, the script is much different—if folks are dancing, there is also always grinding involved. Grinding is when two or more people dance body-to-body, dancing with little space between each other. Frequently, this looks like one person standing upright or close to upright as another person presses their backside against the other person’s crotch area. In a heterosexual context, the man-identifying person will be the one in the back while the woman-identifying person will be front. Wade’s participants described doing a “mating dance” to lure someone in and once two people are connected they continue to participate in “clothed sex with a stranger” (2017, 32). One woman-identifying student explained that “all [she] need[s] to do is move [her] hips ‘until a male arrives’” (Wade 2017, 32). Here, the female-identifying student explains the process of objectifying herself so that “a male” arrived, viewing her performance as pleasurable to his taste. Alex recalled this in her interview:

I hooked up with this one guy. We went to like Meadow or whatever and I was there with two friends and then I was dancing with them and then this guy started grinding on me and I was like, ‘wow like this is happening.’

She later talked about how she went home with this guy because he was persistent and she felt as though she needed to hook up with him, despite her acknowledgement that she wasn’t really into it. Alex’s and Wade’s participants’ experiences shows how grinding is very often a stepping stone to a hookup. However, in Alex’s case it seems that the stepping stone is so “effective” and that hookup culture is so pervasive that she went with him despite her, most likely because she felt like she “should.”
3. Hookup

At some point in the night, someone might ask the question “do you want to leave?” and the implication is that a hookup would likely be to follow. Lily explained how hookups normally arise for her, saying that:

Usually for the most part…[and] it's a mutual feeling and whether it be just talking for a little bit or dancing and then often the guy initiates, 'oh you want to get out of here' or if we're with a small group of people [we will wait] until one of us leaves.

At Williams, when gossip is circulating, the phrase “they’re hooking up” is more commonly uttered than “they’re dating.” However, the terms of the “hooking up” situation are, like the rest of hookup culture, ambiguous. If two people are “hooking up,” that could mean that these people are consistently sexually intimate, ranging from a regular Saturday night booty call to friends who are also having sex with one another but are not romantically intimate. Meanwhile, exclusivity of a hookup means that things are more consistent (but supposedly not more serious)— the two parties are committed to one another enough to be sexually intimate with each other, but are resistant to the label of ‘dating.’ Usually, one would not be seen in public with the person they are exclusively hooking up with and, if they are, that reads more like a romantic relationship than just a hookup.

A “booty call” is the late-night text sent by an acquaintance who is looking for casual sex (or, the recipient of such text). It also could be the action of sending a late-night text (i.e. “I got booty called”). Colloquially, this late-night booty call text is also known as a “hey you up?” text, sent around the hours of 10pm to 3am. Bogle’s definition of this is slightly dated, as she says “a booty call is a late-night phone call placed, often via cell phone, to an earlier hookup partner, inviting him or her over for another hookup encounter” (2007, 122). Nowadays, people don’t call each other, but rather send a text or a Tinder, Bumble or Grindr message. Bogle also highlights how booty calls tend to incorporate ambiguous language (i.e. “do you want to come over?”) and
never explicitly mention sex, but it’s always implied. Though words don’t directly communicate intentions, timing of the text and the relationship history does all the work of translating meaning.

4. Aftermath

Most of the time with hookups, there is no aftermath besides an exchange of closed-mouth smiles in the dining hall or an awkward hello on the way to class. Lily explained this status quo, saying:

I think if you don't straight up say, ‘oh, I'm not really looking for like a one-night thing— I want someone that's gonna be consistently there’ then it's just going to be very assumed that it's just a very casual one-time thing. Unless it starts happening more frequently, but still if somebody doesn't say, ‘oh I'm interested in more or I like you or something like that, then it's just assumed that it's just purely physical.

The baseline assumption going into a hookup is that it has no permanence and the intimacy will not carry into the future (though the awkwardness might). Thus, for a person to establish anything more than the normative “nothing” baseline is a path of resistance that necessitates work.

A few people mentioned Sunday brunch as also a location in which parties from last night’s hookup assess whether or not they can acknowledge one another in public. Occasionally, this would spark certain tensions, particularly if the lack of acknowledgement only went one way. Turquoise told me about a particular instance she witnessed:

Well the best line I ever heard was, so this girl had had a sexual interaction with this gentleman, and then they were in line for brunch at Paresky. And he completely ignored her. So she's just goes, "if I'm kind enough to give you a fucking blowjob, you can at least say hi”… It was just like one of those things where it was very accepted where like after you like hook up if you see them at the dining hall you just look the other way.

The normalization of ignoring someone you were sexually intimate with the night prior is written into the script, allowing for emotional distance between the parties. However, this being said,
Sunday brunch clearly holds some kind of emotional stake for people. Brunch is the setting for making hookups known to others and accruing social benefit from the experience and sharing. However, it also acts as a setting for potential unpleasant feelings if one runs into their hookup from the night prior, sparking awkwardness, humiliation, embarrassment, and disrespect.

Though alcohol consumption is used to erase or at least conceal meaning, the potential for meaning and meaningful relationships peeks out through the existence of long-term hookups or even relationships. Many of my interviewees discussed “consistent hookups,” explaining that some people fall into a kind of scenario where they will hook up with someone after a night out and find themselves hooking up with that person every weekend consistently. Violet, a straight white woman, who had been in one of these long-term hookups before, said that her first encounter happened because she was on the same team as the guy she was interested in. She described the progression of the hookup as follows:

And then we just ended up kind of hanging out to watch TV. And then we just kind of started making out and [we were] sort of going home together after parties and then spending the night together every single night or at least like eight nights in a row and then I'd go home for one and then it'd be four more nights.

Violet said that she would spend most nights sleeping over in this boy’s room, but that they weren’t dating because they didn’t want to “ruin it” by dating each other. This idea of “ruining,” seems to be derived from the idea that a label stating commitment is what establishes potential risk, pain and “ruin,” not the emotional attachment that may precede said label. Violet said that her situation was what people call “‘exclusively hooking up’...[which is] the sense that we're not dating but we spend a lot of time together.”

Turquoise talked about the many confusing stages of a relationship that hookup culture allows and the complexities that come with defining a relationship:

My grandma talks about back in [her] day like a boy just asked you out and then you went on a date but right now because of hookup culture, there are so many different
stages to a relationship. You're just hooking up, you are casually dating but not exclusive, then you are exclusive. But are you open are you closed? Is it one-sided or two-sided? Are we living together? Are we not living together?

Dating culture was based on actually conversing and engaging with the other party, establishing some form of non-sexual connection between the two people; while, in contrast, hookup culture is founded on having meaningless sex and non-connection. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that dating allowed for more clear communication (on the grounds of connection) whereas the hooking up is ambiguous and confusing because communication is not deemed as an essential part of the culture. The assumption of casualness and the lack of communication that is normalized by the hookup culture script (seen through the assumption of the one-night stand) makes it so that negotiating anything more than a one-time hookup is nebulous and difficult because there are so many possible qualifiers for a relationship: exclusive, non-exclusive, committed and closed, committed but open, etc. Essentially, the dictionary around hookup culture is so big and undifferentiated that clear communication is difficult and this notion of choice in hookup culture becomes detrimental instead of beneficial.

At the same time, it seems like people who do actually end up in relationships often get there through hookup culture and not through “traditional” dating. Peaches described this progression to me:

[People] don’t really ask people out at Williams...like people don’t ask people out on dates. Relationships more happen [with] two people who don’t really know each other well hooking up at a party and then they do it consistently a couple weekends and then it's like 'oh, you know, what are we' and then it kind of leads that way.

So then what’s “dating?” People on college campuses equate dating with an explicit, exclusive commitment of time, effort, and emotions to one another, an idea often tinged with connotations of burden. At Williams, dating almost seems like a last resort. People aspire to have all the benefits of a relationship— the sex, the emotional vulnerability, the attention and
affirmation, etc.—without the explicit label of “dating” and will go on saying that they are “exclusively hooking up” as long as possible even though they may be exhibiting behaviors that resemble dating, such as being seen in public together, getting dinner, spending every weekend night together, and so on. Bogle explains that the term ‘date’ is used “to refer to (a) going out alone with someone with whom you are already in a serious relationship, or (b) the person you take to a formal dance...neither of these scenarios is very common because going on dates is no longer the centerpiece of campus social life as it once was” (2007, 46).

**Hookup Culture’s Social Facts**

When asked to define hookup culture, interviewees often stressed its casualness and constructed hookup culture as the antithesis of long-term, committed relationships (though it was also talked about as the way people fell into relationships). Rose captures this perfectly, as she expressed:

I would say hookup culture is like a general sort of like collective set of beliefs or practices that center around like physical intimacy which could include sex or not. The expectation is that it will be casual and NSA "No Strings Attached," [with] no expectations of relationships to follow.

Like Rose, all interviewees used language centered around sex to describe their understandings of hookup culture—many specifically used the words “casual” and whenever “relationship” was used, it was used as a contrast to what hookup culture is to them.

Something to note throughout is that hookups are meant to be sequestered from any sort of feeling—emotions are seen as unwanted and at odds with hookup code. Alex commented on this, saying:

I was reading this *New York Times* article from two years ago. And it really resonated with me where I was just kind of like, how is it this kind of structure...[that] draws a distinct line between like what is emotional and like kind of intimate like sex, you know versus just this kind of...exchange where... both people are trying really, really hard to ensure that you there are no feelings... It's like I'm denying how sex is kind of almost inherently emotional and tied to feelings, you know versus I feel like it's very hard to
perform that act or make out with someone without feeling something. I feel like what hookup culture is that it's really trying to distance itself from from [those] kind of emotions with someone for an hour and then [after] cutting all ties.

Alex here highlights the fundamental challenge that is always undercutting hookup culture: the attempt to divorce sex, which is arguably the most physically vulnerable one could be with another person, from any sort of emotion. And yet, even so, feelings are often the defining factor of any hookup—if there is an unequal presence of emotions, hookups will burn up in flames or slowly dwindle. The party that is less emotionally invested or emotionally expressive in these interactions is often the person who has power, which manifests as that person having the ability to dictate the trajectory of the relationship due to a lower level of investment. To engage with hookup culture, one must constantly engage with the game of who can care less.

Interviewees reported that, in heterosexual hookups, it can often be predicted who will possess more power in an interaction based on gender. Past research has analyzed hookup culture as placing the power in the hands of who is less attached to the hookup versus who is more “into” or excited by the situation. In my interviews, Anna discusses this idea,

I think as women we're like, at least in my experience, we tend to be more emotionally invested. And so it's kind of just like waiting on the guy to get his life together and decide, are you ready for this or are you not? Like let me know or let me go.”

It is unclear whether this analysis of hookup culture through the gender binary is representative of how power operates in hookup culture, however, many of my participants told me that they observed this same trend. It is not impossible, though, that women adopt this outlook on hookup culture because they have been socialized to be more emotionally attuned and emotionally intelligent than men. Women of color have particularly been expected to bear the burden of emotional labor in many of their relationships, exacerbating this dynamic. Therefore, when it comes to relationships it tends to be more difficult for women to detach from their feelings.
because hegemonic values in society such as toxic masculinity and rational, capitalist frameworks for emotion do not yet encourage all people to practice emotional intelligence.

**Hookup Spaces**

When asked what spaces they associate with hookup culture, nearly all 21 respondents spoke of Hoxsey Street as the hub for hookup culture. On campus, Hoxsey Street is the most concentrated athlete space, with the soccer team historically occupying 66 Hoxsey, the football team in 71 Hoxsey, and club sports teams in 70 Hoxsey. More often than not, people also listed other athlete-dominated spaces such as Goff’s, which is occupied by the hockey team, and Meadow which has historically been home to the tennis, football, and golf teams. All of these spaces are off-campus housing and are known to have leases that must be signed 3 years in advance, meaning that these students have the financial means to secure a lease for senior housing during their freshman year and the social group security that is guaranteed by the bonds of a sports team. Andrea makes this analysis in her response as well, saying:

To me, I think those locations all have one thing in common, which is that I associate them as fratty places. So like Wood House, for example, sophomore year was the hockey house. That’s where all the hockey players live. Yeah, Perry House was where the WUFO people would have their parties. That’s also where the rugby will have their parties...Also Hoxsey is like the Frat row of Williams to me. That's really where all the rich white kids live. Yeah, so I guess I associate it with like parties and whiteness.

To Andrea, it seems as though the spaces where hookup culture is tied to are mainly white and wealthy spaces hosted and perpetuated by white athletes, acting as a kind of gatekeeping of space. This analysis on Andrea’s part matches the history of hookup culture, which has always been associated with fraternities and sororities on college campuses. As Williams does not have Greek life, it makes sense that these spaces are replicated through other means, such as athlete spaces. However, as a result of the affiliation of mainstream party spaces with whiteness, wealth, and athlete-status, Andrea’s identities make it so that she feels unable to engage both with these
parties and with the hookup culture that is located in them, as a queer, non-white Latinx of mixed race.

In terms of physical space, there are a few crucial elements to what constitutes a party. Watching the commotion on the First Chance dance floor as the light turned on made it evident how visibility (or lack thereof) is a crucial part of how hookups are able to operate on this small campus. Darkness (with alcohol) acts as an agent for people to act upon their desires—it’s as though the absence of visibility allows people to engage in otherwise socially unacceptable behaviors, such as going up to someone and grabbing their hands to dance or even making out with someone in public. Additionally, crowded spaces add to this sense of invisibility and creates an atmosphere of anonymity—if the space is packed then there is less of a likelihood that people will pay attention to what you are doing. Getting lost in a crowd means your actions in that space have less of an impact on what others think of you, merely because no one is witnessing the way you approach, grind on, or make out with another person. It is as though people render these spaces as semi-private, allowing normally privatized behavior exist in this space despite its evident and explicit publicness. Once a space becomes public and visible again (i.e. when the lights over the dance floor are turned on), it’s as though people become starkly aware of their behaviors through the eyes of other people. Wade’s subjects described that parties must be “tastefully dark...dark enough to be sexy” (2017, 32).

A notable common venue for hookup culture is a club or team formal. A friend of mine explained that formals are such a big deal at Williams, specifically during Winter Study, “because there’s nothing else to do.” Formals require all attendees to dress up fancily and to also bring a date. “Date” in this scenario can range from just a friend to a potential crush to a long-term romantic partner and acts as an opportunity for people to have fun with someone they like
to spend time with or meet someone new under ambiguous terms\textsuperscript{3}. At a small school like Williams, people love formals because they offer an opportunity to party with a group you may not otherwise party with. With hookup culture in mind, formals are enjoyable because you can invite someone you are attracted to or want to hookup with as your date. Often times, people who agree to that enter the night knowing there may be potential for a hookup.

\textbf{Queer Hookups in a Hyperheterosexual Culture}

While nearly half of my participants identify as queer in some way, shape, or form, my research is unfortunately not about queerness— it is more focused on race; however, queerness is yet another axis by which hookup culture should be examined simply because queerness fundamentally affects how it operates, given the hyperheterosexuality of hookup culture\textsuperscript{4}. I identify Williams hookup culture as “hyperheterosexual” because it is leaves limited to no space for queer folks to engage. It seems that there is a fundamental difference between queer hookup culture, straight hookup culture, and queer people trying to fit into straight hookup culture. However, I wanted to dedicate a section of my thesis to queer relationality, desire, and hookups because queer women of color deserve this microphone, especially given the dearth of research on their particular experience. In queer hookups, even the definition of a hookup may be fundamentally different from how one would characterize a heterosexual hookup. Charlotte, a straight woman, actually noted this:

\begin{quote}
I guess other people describe it as like having sex, but I feel like the term itself is like kind of outdated because people like assume it means having [penetrative] sex, but for queer hookups or other things it's all totally different.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{3} It is interesting to note the terminology “date” and its approximiation to dating culture.\textsuperscript{4} Frankly, there deserves to be a completely separate book on queerness (and specifically queer women) in hookup culture, since such research has yet to be done (and there is evidently a rich potential for study).
Charlotte mentioned this because the common understanding of ‘hookup’ tends to be extremely contingent upon the definition of sex, which she said is commonly defined as penetrative sex in heterosexual hookup culture. Charlotte’s response is also a commentary on how queer sex is often delegitimated because it cannot be understood or actualized in the way the current heterosexist, transphobic, homophobic framework identifies sex. Sex or even the term hookup defined as penetrative sex inherently assumes that the two people engaging in the interaction occupy cis, normative, heterosexual bodies.

Many of the queer women who I interviewed said that the queer community at Williams was very small, a statement usually expressed with a negative valence. Rose reflected on her time at Williams, saying:

    I think also like there were a lot of people who like weren't satisfied the like the pool of options for dating. I definitely noticed that like within the queer community at Williams because it is just very small.

Rose herself said she was frustrated by both the smallness and insularity of the queer community at Williams. Veronica also expressed dissatisfaction with the queer community at Williams:

    And the queer Community at Williams? Wow. What a fucking mess it was just like—I couldn't feel like I could be myself. I felt that I was representing too much when really I'm just trying to discover myself too and my relationship with my girlfriend or really [just] discover myself, you know, overall. And I felt that I was representing like black women and black queer people and people were so invested on knowing about me and what was going on with [my girlfriend].

In Veronica’s case, it the smallness of the queer community at Williams felt palpable in the way that people talked and their nosey-ness regarding Veronica’s relationship at the time.

Furthermore, Veronica’s feeling tokenized and made into a model of “black women and black queer people” by the Williams queer community is a result of its small size. If the queer community were larger and perhaps more diverse during Veronica’s time at Williams, this pressure that she felt would likely be less strong.
Rose experienced the smallness of the Williams queer community in a pretty different way. Though she identified as queer at the time, Rose found herself mostly engaging with cismen despite her wanting to be with women. She personally didn’t feel particularly included in the queer community because she considered it closed off and cliquey during her time at Williams. As a queer woman who enjoyed going to parties and potentially finding people to hookup with there, she also felt like she often hooked up with straight men because she didn’t encounter other queer people at the parties she went to.

It was like, the queer women don't go to these parties. They don't participate in hookup culture. They don't do it. They're very against it. So okay, well if...I just feel like having sex tonight and like it's going to be a man because that's who I can find and like I was very good at like “making hookup culture work for me,” in that I like knew what parties to go to I knew, you know, if I ask that guy to dance with me by the end of the song I could make out with him. And if I want more, I can ask for it and he's probably going to say yes. So yeah, I guess it works for me in the early years when I didn't care so much but I became a little more picky about who I wanted and as I got older.

Rose’s story is indicates that hookup culture is all about doing the easiest thing to get by. So here, Rose talked about knowing how to make hookup culture work for her, which means getting sex for the least amount of effort possible. Therefore, the easiest path to take as a ciswoman would be to hook up with a cisman because that is how hookup culture is structured. Given this, it’s almost as though the script and the College are both shaping behavior which ultimately shapes desire to some extent as well. Though Rose said she took the path of least resistance, engaging in this space is still effortful and messy and is particularly demanding of women in particular. Andrea also testified to this mismatch of hookup culture and queer folks.

I've never like had a queer hookup at Williams...The individuals who are not like cis men who I've engaged with — it's mostly been like under the guise of like let's date, let's be in a relationship.
From Andrea and Rose’s stories it seems that queer folks seem to not look to hookup culture as an immediate outlet for intimacy because it is more difficult to find queer people at a stereotypical college party, given the homogeneity and homophobia of the space.

The queer community at Williams seems to be particularly small, which makes breaking the pronounced heterosexuality of party spaces even more difficult when there is not even a large enough contingency of queer people to hookup with, let alone disrupt the space. However, one thing that came up was that the “hookup then ignore” phenomenon that usually arises in the aftermath of a hookup is not a phenomenon that exists among queer folks that I talked to. The smallness of the community perhaps makes this reality true. On the other hand, when I asked a friend why queer people don’t ignore people the day after, she spoke of how the queer identity is politicized and thus fostering queer solidarity among the small percentage of people at Williams who identify as queer is not only good for community but necessary for survival. It seems, however, those who identify as queer at Williams have to conform to the heterosexual script of hookup culture (in behavior and perhaps even in who they decide to pursue) to be able to access casual sex in the way that they are “supposed to” or want to for exploration as college students.

The Hookup Clock

Hookups have both a short-term and long-term timeline. Short-term, they are not meant for longevity— as mentioned before, the expectation is that hookups are temporary, usually one-time interactions. Therefore, people operate according to this norm, acting sans care toward their sexual partners because they are not in a relationship, not exchanging numbers at the end of a night, and sometimes not even knowing or remembering the other person’s name after the hookup. Because of the temporariness and supposed “meaninglessness” of the interaction, there is no need to invest in the other party because the relationship will not be sustained so things such as equal pleasure in an interaction, communication, and even consent are not normalized let
alone valued in a hookup. The lack of investment is consequently translated into a lack of kindness and perhaps even basic decency, as reflected in sexual assault statistics that have been on the rise.

Hookups have a peculiar temporality. Isabelle, when asked to define hookup culture, said “I think it's really about the way it's initiated and engaged in like romantic or sexual encounters that are often not thought of as long-term. Or does not necessarily carry the burden of a more emotionally involved relationship.” Unless they occur within the context of a previously established relationship, hookups are understood to be temporary until said otherwise. Tina encoded this sentiment: “you wouldn't expect emotional dependence or attachment from either side out of this interaction. And I think that for me is what a hookup is, it's like a single interaction without expectations of continuing.” Alex explained her freshman approach to hookup culture as going in with the idea that, “I'll just like hook up with this person. It'll be fun, you know, and I like never have to talk to him again.” For Janelle, hookup culture makes her think:

One night stands, like poor communication, "hit it quit it" type actions...hookup culture to me and the way that I think about it is not something that's like founded on communication or getting to know someone or being intentional and considerate about your actions.

These actions are short-term— Rose explained that hookup culture is “a culture of...something casual or physical and like sort of like immediate gratification,” centered around the achievement of momentary pleasure from a person no matter the connection (or lack thereof) to them.

Hookup culture exists outside of the college campus, but it exists in a much less predominant form. Once people graduate they seem to entertain other types of romantic relationality, sometimes leaving hookups behind for more something that more resembles dating culture. This common rendering of hookup culture to college campuses speaks to how hookup
culture is not sustainable long-term. Hookup culture seems to not be a permanent romantic regime for most people and is usually seen by many as a transient stage before trying to find someone to commit to for longer periods of time or even for life. However, many people are willing to abandon the casualness of hookups if they find someone they truly like and are excited about committing to. A key feature of the success of college hookup culture is the fact that everyone is within close proximity to one another, there is a direct community available; therefore, when the physical community is lost, people resort to dating or hookup apps to rekindle that sense of being surrounded by people you could choose to engage with and share something in common. Turquoise, Class of 2014, spoke of the continuation of hookup culture off college campuses, explaining that dating apps facilitate hookups.

I think the hookup culture still exists, especially now and after college because of the casual dating apps. I think what used to happen at bars now happens through dating apps and because of like the degree of separation, it's like far easier to meet someone, you know, even have a sexual encounter with them and never have it have real consequences because like you could delete your app...there's an essence of anonymity and I think it's very prevalent.

Thus, people have managed to recreate hookup culture for themselves through apps, but hooking up seems to no longer be the predominant script of intimacy nor do folks feel like they should or need to hook up if they would prefer not to.

Turquoise explained to me that hookup culture was great until it got old, which was only a couple years out of college.

It was just one of those things where I like when I wanted to have fun and like had no strings attached kind of encounters, It was great. But I think it was like harder when I was like around like 24, 25 when I wanted like, you know, you get a little tired of like, you know, just the casualness. It was like, 'oh, let me see if they can get to know something a little bit more meaningful’ and that was hard.
Turquoise noted here that people seemed to move out of a “no strings attached” mentality after college, opting for more emotionally intimate relationships instead of emotionless ones.

Veronica, Class of 2017, after reminiscing on hookups she had in the past, also said:

> Have I had a lot of sex? Here in the city, to be honest, not much because work has just really consumed me more like I don't own my weekends as much as I used to because I'll be doing shoots or something.

Though college life is busy, it is much more conducive to hookup culture because of the concentration of young, single people all in the same place and all running on the same schedule. Once one enters the workforce and lives in a city, it seems to be much more difficult to navigate hookup culture with that much ease.

None of my interlocutors seem to be hoping that hookup culture will remain with them for the rest of their lives, but at the same time hookup culture seems to be a rite of passage for college students to truly have the best four years of their lives. When asked how they envision their love lives now, most of the alumni I talked to (who weren’t already in committed relationships) responded that they’re looking for something more substantial than what hookup culture can provide or at least were open to the possibility of developing something more.

Janelle, who had been in New York City for only two months at the time and graduated in the Class of 2018, explained her perspective:

> I long-term really want to be in a committed relationship. I have dated two people. But neither of them have turned into something long-term or like committed or like been what I want a partnership to look like and be.

Janelle continued to talk about how she is navigating both her romantic life and social life in a way that fosters meaningful connections and allows her to create an intentional community. At the time, she didn’t want to just be having sex if she wasn’t also making deep relationships with people. Grace, Class of 2017, who was also single at the time and who had been living in Boston for a little over a year, explained that she would like to be dating.
I think I would prefer dating with someone I really like, which is uncommon...the pool is very swollen within that pool I value genuine connections and when I can have really good conversations. I have an impossibly high standard.

Though both Janelle and Grace were more interested in dating or more emotionally intimate relationships, they seemed to accept hooking up as a fallback option to attain intimacy as they found relationships they were perhaps more excited about. However, neither of them saw hooking up as the end-goal in their romantic and/or sexual lives at the moment, which seemed representative of the post-graduate group as a whole.

However, Turquoise spoke to me about her approach to relationships after leaving Williams and for her things seemed to be slightly different.

When I came to Boston, I think like at first I was very intrigued by, you know, being with older guys. But at the same time, what happened was that they were far more interested in having a relationship with me, not so much the hook up element. I thought I would be their sexy little arm candy and they were like, 'no, I think we should, you know, take things slow and be in a relationship’ and I was like, ‘oh you're saying that because you're 35, and I'm here at 22, just trying to get my free meal.’ So I think that was interesting because that was not my experience at Williams.

After graduating, Turquoise wanted to continue the hookup culture that she was so familiar with at Williams, but she found the opposite conundrum where people wanted to date her instead of just have sex with her. To her, the age gap seemed to cause this difference for her. This transition adds evidence to the idea that hookup culture is really only a phase for many people before they decide they are ready to commit and be in more invested relationships.

**Conclusion**

The hookup culture script is filled with paradoxes and is, at the core, not intuitive.

Whether it is the meaning-making system that necessitates alcohol or the way emotional vulnerability should be avoided at all costs, hookup culture often seems to direct people to do things that lead to less than pleasant outcomes. This dating culture establishes a way of being that prioritizes the pursuit of temporary physical pleasure while ignoring and/or avoiding one’s
own feelings and having no regard for others’ feelings as well. To do this successfully, one must follow many specific steps to finally achieve the aim: prepare for the night, pregame and get drunk, approach your target, make your moves, and then deal with the aftermath, repeat. To successfully stay in the circuit, one must repeat these rituals and stay as detached as possible. There are very specific rules for hookup culture that must be followed, ranging from the way that one can define “hookup” to the time at which people stop considering hookup culture as a romantic and/or sexual outlet for them. Ultimately, however, these rules are poorly constructed for the purpose that they supposedly serve for people who are not cismen, as the regime of this behavior is structured to benefit men. Hookup culture fails to deliver pleasure to all the people it promises it to; to have truly pleasurable sex, which is what hookup culture claims to deliver, one must communicate clearly and openly with their partner—this is made impossible if the script requires people to operate under the guise of detachment and denial of their own emotions and vulnerabilities.
CHAPTER II: TO FEEL OR NOT TO FEEL?

“It's one of those things where— when you're already in a space that is so charged and formed by structures of racism and sexism and elitism and capitalism then of course these things are going to interact with the ways that people treat each other and care about each other and love each other and fuck each other.” -Janelle

At 10:10pm the night before Valentine’s Day, I stood on top of a chair, peering over a sea of people trying to see the projection coming out of a tiny portable projector. The room was packed with people from wall to wall, bodies pressed up against each other all listening intently to the presenter— so intently, in fact, that when a white man in the corner was talking to his friend too loudly for people’s liking, multiple people shushed him loudly so that they could hear better. In these types of setting, namely, social spaces like Pub Night (an event run by College Council), I had never seen so many people wanting to listen so closely. The air was stuffy, thick with pheromones, anticipation, and concentration on the presentations in front of them. Tonight was Pub Night’s DateMyFriend.ppt, an event for folks to have the opportunity to pitch their friends as a potential girlfriend/boyfriend/partner/person to date to the people in the room.

It was evident by the sheer number of people who were in that room that this “date my friend” idea was intriguing for folks. There are very few to no spaces on campus that are actually dedicated to dating or being intimate with someone in a way that doesn’t involve meeting at a party. The occasion straddled a line between facetious and serious— evidently there were a few things serious about this: 1) the person being presented was single 2) this person is also looking for a way to no longer be single (even if this is a joke) 3) the people in the room had bought into this idea in some way, shape, or form. There were five men and eight women who were presented in total. Most of the people being presented identified as heterosexual, but a few were
openly queer. People of the same gender presented their friends, with mostly women pitching because there were almost twice as many women than men. When men were pitching, they were pitching their fellow men.

The sheer volume of people in the room made it evident that people were itching for this kind of opportunity, curious about what it would be and what it could mean— would any romances actually come of this night? Who might emerge from the shadows and ask out one of the people who was pitched? Does dating still exist on this campus? The event was a spectacle because of its rarity— dating is so uncommon at Williams that people flocked to this event to see what could possibly be made of it.

Perhaps it says something about dating at Williams when the night’s spectacle is a phenomenon around dating that presents as an auction: the presenter stands in front of a crowd, offering up their chosen person to members of the audience for their pleasure (if they chose to opt into it). The traits that people thought would be attractive to the audience included: humor, intellect, social media skills, and other talents that they might have hidden in their sleeves. Each person being pitched would be standing at the front of the room as something to be looked at, but really wouldn’t say a word as their friend told a room full of people their favorite hobbies, classes, and date ideas. The presentations were highly visual and often included both photos and videos of the person in question. Further, it was interesting how many of these presentations were focused on the body, including funny, thinly-veiled innuendo for comments about the person’s body that alluded to their sexual prowess or ability to give someone sexual pleasure.

Neoliberalism in Hookup Culture

As we operate in a society dictated by late-stage capitalism, our work lives, family lives, social lives, and even romantic lives are shaped by capitalism and a market mentality that comes
with it. The infusion of capitalist principles into romance and private life makes Pub Night’s DateMyFriend.ppt possible by characterizing people as products to be pitched, sold, and acquired. This stage of capitalism is often described by the term “neoliberalism,” which “involves the extension of market principles into all areas of life” (Elias, Gill, Scharff, and Orbach 2017) and is a “particular form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (Bown 2015, 17). Neoliberalism is a critical term, used as an object of study and not a point of view or historical event (Elias et al., 2017). In Dardot, Laval, and Elliot’s words:

> The hard core of the [neoliberal] ideology supposedly comprises identification of the market as natural reality. According to this naturalist ontology, to achieve equilibrium, stability and growth, it suffices to leave this entity to its own devices...neo-liberalism is cast as a pure and simple rehabilitation of laissez-faire (2014, 2).

The personal responsibility that people feel with the normalization of the market is representative of Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of ‘liquid modernity’ (2000). Bauman’s term, liquid modernity, encapsulates the fluidity that people are afforded in modernity and the number of choices that they are able to have (2000). As capitalism prevails, there are an increasing number of objects and availabilities to choose from: careers, cities to live in, refrigerators to furnish one’s kitchen with, and general life paths one can take:

> These days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given’, let alone ‘self evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers...the liquidizing powers have moved from the ‘system’ to ‘society’...have descended from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ level of social cohabitation. (2000, 7)

Given the conditions that Bauman describes here, it is evident that one must be flexible and fluid amidst all the possibilities that are available to any one individual. Bauman wrote that the world is undergoing inevitable, rapid change— he said that liquid modernity “is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence and uncertainty the only certainty” (2000, 82).
Related to Bauman’s ideas of liquidity, Richard Sennett speaks to the flexibility that is necessitated from a liquid modernity. Sennett claims that the world has shifted from a linear, clear narrative to one “marked instead by short-term flexibility and flux...corporations break up or join together, jobs appear and disappear, as events lacking connections” (1972, 30). People’s lives today are much more tenuous and unpredictable than they once were, forcing people to grow accustomed to taking risks and to be flexible in taking charge of creating their own life paths (Sennett 1972, 82). Sennett explains this, saying:

What's peculiar about uncertainty today is that it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead it is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal..."No long term" disorients action over the long term, loosens bonds of trust and commitment, and divorces will from behavior. (1972, 31)

The limitless choices produced by a neoliberal capitalist world have produced uncertainty, which permeates into both larger life structures and smaller daily events. Ultimately, Sennett argues in his book that this flexibility and uncertainty is actually eroding at people’s individual characters, dissolving the walls that have historically provided structure for character formation.

Hookup culture is in no way immune to the effects of neoliberalism is therefore beholden to the ways of the market. Colin Crouch states that “at the centre of the neoliberal project stands a portrayal of the qualities of the market” (2011, 24). In this way, it comes as no surprise that hookup culture’s conventions match how a capitalist market operates, with its emphasis on self-pleasure, rapid rates of turnover, and individual autonomy and choice (or other forces masked as choice). As Wood explains in her article, The Origin of Capitalism, “the market implies offering and choice,” she says that neoliberalism paints the market as a space of freedom and choice.

However, a truly capitalist market space makes it so one has to be a hypercompetitive chooser to get what one needs in life. Thus, though neoliberalism presents itself as freeing, a person cannot choose to do anything but participate in the market and become a market actor. Similarly, the
entire premise of college hookup culture is that people have the opportunity to choose whoever they wish to be sexually or romantically engaged with. Meanwhile, one has no other way to access intimacy than through hookup culture, ultimately causing students to feel like they have to engage in the script and become hookup culture actors. As neoliberal capitalism has normalized people to believe, *choice* is always better than *no choice*. Keeping one’s door open to as many options as possible seems optimal for making the absolute *best* choice for whatever decision one is trying to make, whether it is a pair of white sneakers, a job, or a romantic partner. This act of keeping options open also leaves a great potential for change, which seems to be an inevitable force. As choices get harder to make because options are increasing and are indecisive, then people feel even more personally responsible than they did before to take action and latch onto the best decision possible (Bauman 2000).

One’s capacity to choose is critical to one’s identity as a culturally competent citizen in a late capitalist world. Having the best thing necessitates choice and taking time to sift through what is available to a person as a means to arrive at the very best option. In neoliberal capitalism, Western people are convinced that a person is individually responsible for the trajectory of their lives, whether it is their career, their family life, their romantic life, and so on. The tenets of neoliberalism tell people to believe that everything that happens to them, whether it is positive or negative, is a result of something that they personally did or that they could have changed the consequences of the event if they had just acted differently (Bauman 2000).

In the context of love, neoliberalism encourages and perhaps even requires people to operate through a self-preservation, self-gratification framework, in which everyone fends for themselves because they must (and everyone else is fending for themselves and not you). Eva Illouz wrote:
...the model of mental health which massively penetrated intimate relationships demanded that love be aligned to definitions of well-being and happiness, which ultimately rejected suffering, and commanded one to maximize one’s utilities. This model of health puts knowledge and defense of one’s self-interest squarely at the center of the emotionally mature self. To love well means to love according to one’s self-interest. The emotional experience of love increasingly contains and displays a utilitarian project of the self, in which one has to secure maximum pleasure and well-being.” (2011, 164-5)

Illouz described this ‘self-interest’ as a goal that everyone is striving toward, which is facilitated by a utilitarianism that permeates into even that which has historically been construed as irrational, inconvenient, and tragic at worst. The neoliberal idea of control that people are socialized with makes focusing on self-interest in love and desire manifest in going through a thorough, complete, detailed process to find the best romantic match for them.

Illouz also went on to explain the ways in which love, which people previously understood as passionate, fervent, and embodied, has now become a thing to be controlled and a set of boxes to check rather than a feeling or instinct.

While romantic love retains a uniquely strong emotional and cultural hold on our desires and fantasies, the cultural scripts and tools available to fashion it have become increasingly at odds with and are even undermining the sphere of the erotic. There are thus at least two cultural structures at work in the emotion of love: one based on the powerful fantasy of erotic self-abandonment and emotional fusion; the other based on rational models of emotional self-regulation and optimal choice. These rational models of conduct have profoundly transformed the structure of romantic desire in undermining the cultural resources through which, historically passion and eroticism have been experienced. (Illouz 2011, 159)

Here, Illouz makes a clear distinction between the kind of “enchanted” love that is “spontaneous, unconditional, overwhelming, and eternal, unique and total” and a love that is beholden to calculation and rationality (2011, 161). The two are antithetical to one another and it seems that the latter has become the more popular framework than the former. This newer iteration of love manifests in a deliberate process, one that has been increasingly rationalized and has much less
of a dependency upon feeling and the embodied experience of being in love. Technology has also aided this transformation, as people’s understandings of love have changed and as their pursuit of self-interest is infused by economic principles and rational frameworks. The kind of denial of feeling and experience that can be seen in this framework is also evident in the hookup script. Requiring people to stay detached during “meaningless” physical intimacy to acquire physical pleasure is part of a contract that forces people to try to deny any emotion that they may feel during intimacy. If the goal is detached pleasure, people will rationalize their way to it.

The process of rationalizing and/or intellectualizing the journey to love is both fueling and fueled by the ways that the states of romantic intimacy have become more ambiguous and complicated as compared to previous understandings of romantic intimacy, mainly through marriage and dating. Today, not only must people find the perfect person, but with the kind of fluidity and multitudes of types of relationships that can exist, they must also figure out what form of relationality is best for them: do they want a casual hookup or a committed relationship? Should they define the relationship or keep things ambiguous? What would the relationship be like if both parties agreed on an open relationship (or what would it be like if one side was open and the other was not)? Thus, increased rationalization shapes not only the choice of partner, but also how to assess who a person wants to be with, but how they want to be with them, on what terms, and with what conditions. Further, rationalization enables one to exercise total control over this contractual negotiation if they so desire.

At Williams, the entire ‘relationship process’ is widely seen as too arduous, complicated, and time consuming in ways that college students at an elite institution cannot afford. College students across the country are buckling under the ever-intensifying rhythms of knowledge production patterns, in which students are perpetually working so that they turn in their papers on
time, fulfill work study requirements, participate in an almost unbearable number of extracurriculars, and foster relationships all to get a college degree so that they may be able to pursue the career they wish to and potentially support a future family. With these pressures and thousands of others, Williams students tell themselves that they just ‘don’t have the time to date.’

Ann expressed this in her interview:

And I mean, I think for the first half of college, I just wasn't really willing to deal with relationships. It just seemed like too much work and obviously I was way too busy anyway with school trying to survive, live, what have you.

Multiple participants reported either feeling this sentiment themselves or hearing it from others on campus, indicating that being “busy” is seen as a legitimate excuse for not wanting to engage in intimacy. Personally, I have heard this with my friends and even admit to uttering this phrase myself.

People at Williams “do the most,” as the colloquialism goes. Over my four years, I’ve observed the ways in which Williams students bring a fervent intensity to the activities they do, doing all that they can to do things right. From a young age, students are told by educators (and the education system at large) that they have had to adopt a high-achieving, intense work ethic to get accepted to an elite institution. I have seen the ways in which this intensity keeps people in the library until absurd hours at night but also fuels students’ binge drinking habits on weekends. So when it comes to dating, it sounds like Williams students want to do it right and want to do it well. Particularly if dating is a rationalized process, then the perfectionists who attend elite institutions of higher education like Williams may actually be overwhelmed by the prospect of going through another intense vetting process, even if it’s a means to experience commitment and potentially love. Therefore, the ability to apply perfectionism to dating because of its

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5 But, of course, this isn’t all that gets students into elite institutions. Socioeconomic class, race, access, etc. are all driving factors in which students get accepted where.
rationalization is likely to push students who are already stressed about career, finances, education, classes, and more, toward adopting and adapting to hookup culture, where they are expected to invest as little as possible and are still supposedly promised untethered pleasure by this way of relating on any given night. This perfectionism can be seen by people’s desire to present their friends as perfect potential suitors Pub Night’s DateMyFriend.pptm, highlighting positive relational qualities like kindness to “attractive” parts of their bodies to their GPAs. The pressure of doing things right and the risk of emotional pain (which would detract from one’s work) is likely to scare people away from even dipping their toes into dating. In comparison, hookup culture is the perfect alternative for students who are afraid of and/or turned off by the daunting process of dating. While dating is about commitment, vulnerability, and involved investment of emotional and other resources, hookup culture is premised upon temporariness, corporeal exchange, and as little investment as possible for maximum return in quick pleasure.

**Choices: More is Always Merrier**

Western common sense tells us that having as many choices as possible is absolutely essential to choosing the best thing overall. At the core, this is a neoliberal idea that fits the rational, scientific framework of thought that emerged from the Enlightenment and has been normalized to the point of common knowledge. Ultimately, freedom is having the ability to choose and the flexibility to choose the right and/or best thing. Illouz argues that the process of choosing a romantic partner has morphed into fulfilling an endless list of qualities—Does this person’s personality fit mine? Do they have financial stability? What kind of job do they work? What is their family like? Is this relationship geographically feasible? Do we want the same thing? The list goes on. Illouz claims that modernity has changed the way that people approach love—today, people are much more rational and cautious, turning away from the kind of
mystical love that people could not put words to. She said “the ‘enchanted’ experience of love and romance has become difficult to subscribe to’” (Illouz 2011, 162). Given the ways in which liquid modernity has shaped the life of the modern citizen, the inundation of choices that are possible in life are infinite and dating has resultantly gone through this transformation as well:

Rational action is consciously regulated, not random, habitual, or impulsive; the cultural source of such self-conscious regulation can be religious, scientific, political, or economic. A rational attitude undermines enchantment because in order to know and approach an object, it uses systematic rules, independent of the subject and object of knowledge, thus creating a separation between the subject and object of knowledge and de-legitimizing knowledge gained in an epiphanic, traditional, or intuitive mode. (Illouz 2011, 162)

In this excerpt, Illouz illuminates how a rational approach to love operates in comparison to the enchanting kind of love—she says that the rational dating script that has arisen is dictated by a set of blanket rules and regulations that are not specific to the persons at hand. This impersonal quality of the script has, as a result, created a more alienated relationality in which intuitive or embodied knowledge are not necessarily valued as they used to be in romantic relationships. For Illouz, the opposite of the rational approach is epiphanic, meaning that “the intensity and irrationality of one’s feelings are an adequate indication of one’s true feelings” (2011, 31). In this framework, it seems that emotions are valid as they are felt and experienced, not needing extra qualifications or reasons to be legitimate. The flexible modernity that people operate in today requires more and more conditions that must be fulfilled by a partner logistically, leaving no space for perhaps epiphanic or more embodied knowledge to be valued in a relationship.

Additionally, liquid modernity’s portrayal of the future as risky and uncertain also creates the idea that entering into the “wrong” relationship could derail one’s life in a way one may suffer severe long-term consequences.
The transformation of love from epiphanic to rational has happened alongside and has been encouraged by the way dating technology has arisen. Many scholars have explored the ways in which dating technology has fundamentally changed romantic relationships. Sherry Turkle discusses how technology has influenced people’s dating lives:

"You’ll want a fluidity with apps that will become part of your romantic game—apps for meeting, apps for texting and messaging, apps for video chat. All of these bring the promise of businesslike crispness to falling in love. They bring efficiency into the realm of our intimacies. In a world where people live far away from parents and neighborhood ties, apps bring hopes that they will smooth out the hard job of finding a partner without the community connections enjoyed by previous generations. (2015, 180)

In this quote, Turkle combines both Illouz and Sennett, by discussing the ways in which apps have been used as a means to infuse economic principles into dating. Dating and hookup apps deliver a “businesslike crispness” in light of a slippage in emotional ties and intimate community facilitated by flexible modernity. Illouz claims that technology has given people an easier and better platform upon which they can make comparisons and rationally evaluate their partners (2011, 100). Previous to dating apps and even social media, people evaluated compatibility with a person based on in-personal dynamics or interactions but with dating apps one can pre-judge a person’s attractiveness, personality, social ability, prior to meeting them all through the way they present on their digital profiles. It seems that technology has facilitated and encouraged ways of approaching romance that allowed people to reduce each other to discrete qualities or even shorthand descriptions.

This essentializing and ‘efficient’ mentality toward love and dating may help us understand why hookup culture has grown so rampant in modern society. Turkle’s analysis of dating apps includes a discussion of ‘nexting,’ which is essentially the ability to move through people by clicking or swiping—a person can simply make a person disappear on their screens by moving onto the next person in their pool of potential suitors (2015, 184). Hookup culture seems to be
the physical manifestation (or perhaps symptom) of ‘nexting,’ in which a person can have an intimate night with someone and then, the following day, act like nothing actually happened. In hookup culture, you can choose to simply move on from that interaction or you can also try to sustain intimacy with the same person over time—though the script has people expecting a one-night-only situation, there is always the possibility that something more can develop from a hookup and, occasionally, people will take advantage of that potential. Hookup culture allows people to achieve the greatest number of intimate interactions in-person while putting a premium upon “rational” thought through allowing people to avoid the “irrational” format of dating and instead evaluate people on measures like sexiness or social status.

**Hookup Culture as Market**

In modern Western imagination, love and intimacy are considered an organic and natural pursuit of one’s inner feelings and desires that exists outside the reach of the omnipresent purview of capitalism. Modern movies suggest love exists beyond rational thinking, across the traditional confines of a romantic relationship when marriage explicitly served as a way for women to achieve social status or to climb the socioeconomic ladder (Illouz 2011, 8). Despite this narrative, intimacy is still intertwined closely with understandings of economics, though in a way that is much more insidious and undetectable today.

Hookup culture can be understood through the metaphor of a capitalist market in many ways. This metaphor serves as an easy way to breakdown the ways in which capitalism permeates into modern relationality. The essential aspects of a capitalist market are all present through the norms of hookup culture: property, production, consumption, accumulation of capital, labor, coercion, and commodity exchange. In hookup culture, the body is both the property and the product of labor. Wissinger mentions glamour labor as essential to what it
means to be a woman in today’s Western economy, defining glamour labor as “the high maintenance of stylish self-presentation by working to achieve a body and ‘look’ that fits the current fashion” (2015, 4). Wissinger distinctly uses language of the workplace to describe the dynamics within this structure. In hookup culture, the exchange occurs as the physical act of engaging two bodies for pleasure. And if the exchange is the actual hookup, then the site of exchange is the bedroom and the marketplace for commodities is the party space itself. The experience of a hookup, in many college spaces, amounts to accumulation of social capital, a bragging right for people to display their social status and sexual prowess. The nature of hookup temporality as non-permanent allows for the accumulation of hookup experiences over one’s college career—this is, in turn, a form of social capital for a college student. The number of people a person has hooked up with acts as a form of social wealth.

Over the past century, sexiness has become a cultural category “making sexual desirability one of the central criteria for choosing a mate and for shaping one’s own personhood” (Illouz 2011, 45). The valuation of sexiness lends itself to the objectification of people, putting a premium on one’s appearance instead of their person. This transformation of person to object fits into the high turnover, fast-exchange nature of modern capitalism that focuses on the use and discard of items rather than the formation of attachments to objects. After all, the objective of hookups is to achieve “fast, random, no-strings-attached sex,” with the fastness and convenience often being one of the most important draws to hookup culture (Wade 2017, 41). All interviewees mentioned desirability and sexual appeal as related to one’s self-perceived worth. Particularly, all women of color talked about the ways in which race is often intertwined with this measure of self-worth. Janelle, when asked to define hookup culture, responded,
“I think it looks very different for like white gay men than it does for like Black Trans women and I mean like I think there's like a like, oh good culture and like how its defined is so dependent on who you are and what your body looks like in the ways that your body is privileged. So for me, hookup culture was a lot of going home alone. A lot of tears, a lot of feeling unworthy and like ugly and undesirable—a lot of jealousy, a lot of despair.”

One’s performance on the hookup culture market shapes and affects self-perception and self-worth. Janelle’s expressions of jealousy and despair are an outcome of the commodification of sex, which has fueled hookup culture—the linkage of self-worth to one’s desirability as a sexual commodity at a party elicits deeply negative emotions in a among those whose bodies aren’t viewed as desirable on a party circuit. Illouz discusses the intersections of sexiness and capitalism—and sexism and capitalism—explaining that the “the commodification of sex and sexuality—their penetration into the very heart of capitalist engine—made sexuality into an attribute and experience increasingly detached from reproduction, marriage, long-lasting bonds, and even emotionality” (2011, 45). This commodification of sex appeal makes it so that the way one is valued in the marketplace of the party space also reflects on their sense of self-worth and sex is given various different and new meanings that it did not carry when it was nested in the framework of long-term commitment.

Property and Production

Hookup culture is a corporeal experience. Out of 21 interviews, 18 of my interviewees used the word “body.” As sexiness has come to rise as a metric of attractiveness as well as of self-worth, the body has become the most critical part of this metric. Rosalind Gill describes a postfeminist era in which the “possession of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline, and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgments of female attractiveness”
(Gill 2016). This kind of surveillance and discipline can be seen distinctly through how women prepared for a night out, regardless of whether they thought they would hookup with someone that night. Most women I spoke to had nearly identical rituals of preparation for a night out if they enjoy partying—they spoke of getting dressed up, the alcohol beverages they liked to drink, the makeup they would wear, the choice to shave or not shave that night. Some women mentioned how they enjoyed getting dressed up. Peaches’ described her multi-step ritualistic process in-depth:

I usually shower before I go out, like wash my face and do new makeup and I usually will take longer on my makeup. I'll do more of a full face...I love this time. I love to pamper myself and [do] makeup. You know, I do my eyeliner really nice and thick because it's going to be dark. I always wear big hoops when I go out and I usually wear like the same thing: I'll wear jeans and a black top like a black tank top because it's simple.

This is exactly what Wissinger would coin “glamour labor” (2015). The actions that Peaches describe are all steps toward her crafting of an image that is fashionable and closer to the ideal that is in style at the moment. This is the labor that the good, her body, must go through to be exchanged later that evening when she arrives at the party. Ultimately, the labor will culminate in a profit of pleasure in the short term and social capital in the long term. She is both the laborer and the product being produced, fitting perfectly into the neoliberal idea of self-entrepreneurship. Neoliberal capitalism places personal responsibility upon the subject to perform well in society; thus, “mak[ing] us all ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs,’ not just models or those who are working in fashion or design” (Elias et al. 2017, 5). The more labor goes into preparing the body, the better the product will perform on the market when it is compared to other bodies at the party.

**Marketplace**

If production occurs within the safety of a woman’s bathroom as she gets ready for a night out, then the marketplace must be the party space itself. The party is where the body is
compared to others as well as where the canonical beauty stereotypes that circulate. Here, a body will be recognized for and evaluated by its sexiness and/or attractiveness and those things will often determine whether someone is worth investing time in for the night. In a way, entering that space often implies consent to being evaluated even if that is not a person’s intention—simply being there means that other party attendees may include a person in the pool of people they are considering for the night.

One personal experience of this actually took place on a night when I was doing fieldwork at a party on campus. While both observing and photographing the event, I was approached by a boy who I knew tangentially. Initially, we exchanged a ‘hello’ and some small talk—he asked me why I was taking photos and I told him I was working on my thesis. A little bit later, he came back and told me that I looked “too good” to just be doing work and proceeded to ask me if I wanted to dance. The idea of looking “too good” (I was wearing jeans and a red crop tank top that night) implied that this boy thought my appearance could not have possibly been only for the purpose of work, that I must have dressed myself for the benefit of onlookers or potential sexual partners for the night. Clearly, he thought I had consented to his appraisal just by my being there and dressed the way I was.

At the party, the gaze of any gender acts as the appraisal mechanism, an early precursor to what will come later that evening. The frequency at which one gazes at a person often denotes interest in the product, similar to the behaviors one would exhibit while looking at an exciting item at a store. When trying to decide to buy something, one will often look intentionally at an object, assessing its qualities and its use to them. Perhaps, a person will try to touch and hold the item before they invest in it—likewise a person will also behave in such a way toward a person

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6 In response, I laughed and kindly denied. I continued to photograph the event and he swiftly left my side. We didn’t talk for the rest of the evening.
they might be interested in hooking up with. This may take form in talking to their target and seeing if they like them and even touching the person.

**Exchange**

If the marketplace is the party, then the exchange of the product is the hookup itself. At this phase, two people engage by giving one another pleasure (or perhaps only one party actually receives pleasure) merely on the basis of appearance and sex. After a person has decided to set their eyes on a proper target that they have assessed, the approach to exchange will occur. Alex (and a few others) actually use the word “exchange” to describe the hookup: “It's [a] very intimate kind of exchange and it's weird to have that with a stranger and then, I don't know, see them but not acknowledge it really ever again.” Various techniques are required for someone to have a proper exchange—eliciting jealousy by flirting with other people, leaving the party first to see if the other person will want to leave with them, etc. There are various tactics that are often employed as ways to get someone to engage in the market’s exchange.

The necessary immediate precursor to the exchange is getting two people to go home together, which is often instigated by someone explicitly asking to go back to one of their rooms. This is a veiled request to hook up with the other person—usually a person will not directly ask “do you want to hookup with me?” and will instead use the question “want to go back to my room?” as a way to insinuate that they are interested in hooking up. At times, this will occur at the marketplace itself if the two people were formerly engaged in a conversation or were maybe grinding with one another. However, this can also occur at Snack Bar, the place where everyone ends their night—after getting food together, perhaps one person will walk the other home to see where things go from there.

Two bodies engaging in physical intimacy acts as the exchange as the two parties involved are using each other’s bodies for sexual pleasure, reducing each other to services and
objects that provide pleasure unlike other things that one can do to or use for themselves (i.e. a vibrator during masturbation). While masturbation often does the trick for people, the presence and intimacy of another physical body provides more pleasure than what one can provide just to themselves (or at least that is the culturally appropriate thing to believe). In the most casual of hookups, the body is objectified in the marketplace while it is being evaluated at a party through gaze. It maintains this objectified form as it is being pursued by another party and continues into the hookup itself. Alex explained the lived experience of this, saying:

> It's a space where you wouldn't normally be welcomed in for like anything else right? For intellect, or because they want to hang out with you, or for personality....you're allowed in this space kind of as this sexual object in a way which...expresses that racial and gendered dynamic.

In this quotation, Alex makes it clear that women are not invited to parties because of their brains, but because of the potential for their bodies to be sexual objects. This is further upheld by the way in which bodies must be segregated from the emotions that they hold. Additionally, other “vulnerable” aspects of a person that may make them too emotionally attached to a hookup must be avoided because attachment would break the rules of emotional detachment in hookup culture. The reduction of person to body without feelings is emblematic of an objectification process that is inherent to and necessitated by hookup culture and its model for casual intimacy. This objectification also lends itself to racialization of bodies and the attribution of particular sexual qualities to bodies of color – if a person is only attempting to form a connection with a person for their body, upon which race, gender, ethnicity, etc. are all projected, then that person has no reason to (and is in fact discouraged from) learning more about the person at hand in a way that may combat the notions of race that are more immediate. For example, it is not customary to ask a person what their life story is prior to hooking up with them. In this script, distance is incentivized and even mandated for people to engage in hookup culture.
During the hookup, pleasure is the main aim, which could take different forms ranging from the enjoyment that two people get from being physically close to one another to making the other person orgasm. However, in many situations, both partners do not prioritize pleasure reciprocally and certain people expect pleasure (orgasmic or not) more than others. Heterosexual women across the nation report feeling like they are the neglected party in their casual sexual encounters with men, with many women explaining that they feel as though they are expected to give men pleasure and/or go down on men but the same is not expected of men (Wade 2017, 160). Therefore, women’s accounts of their hookups show that even the dynamics of this exchange are skewed to favor men, exposing the ways in which women are de facto deprioritized in a hookup exchange. Furthermore, women of color seem to have an even more difficult time reaping physical benefits from hookups as the racialization that they experience may also influence the men’s willingness to pleasure them, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

Accumulation of Capital

As hookup culture is the prevailing romantic regime on college campuses, those who are able to engage with it tend to be socially rewarded and those who are unable to experience hookups feel excluded and disenfranchised as a result. In my time at Williams, I have noticed how hookups, who people are hooking up with, how hookups went wrong, etc. are a common conversation topic throughout the week but particularly as the weekend progresses and people are out partying at night. People like to tote around their hookups in different ways, whether in conversation with their friends or through the lists that people keep on their phones as a log of the people they’ve hooked up with. After hooking up with someone they think is desirable, often people will tell their friends about it as a way to process their hookup. This also inherently communicates (whether intentionally or not) that they are available and desirable to others. Often times the Sunday brunch operates as a consistent space for people to discuss their hookups with
their friends. People show up to brunch with stories to tell about their weekends—sharing the gossip about their latest hookups (or other people’s) with their friends as almost a ritualistic dissemination of information and gossip.

An interesting hookup phenomenon that I have seen used by people across the board is something I will call a “hookup list.” A hookup list can come in various forms—a note on the iPhone ‘Notes’ app, a Google doc, an encrypted list on a random note app found on the App Store, etc. Regardless of where it is located, people keep these logs of who they have hooked up with over the years as a reference to reflect back on. It is a, usually digital, list of names of people that one has had sexual intimacy with in ranging levels of commitment. While I do not have enough information about hookup lists to know who usually makes it or not, I have seen a range of such lists, containing entries on anyone from one-night stands to consistent hookups that have lasted many months. Janelle actually told me about her list in passing during her interview. I was asking her about her experiences with hookups and she expressed that she needed to pull up her list to jog her memory.

Janelle: Let me actually consult my list.
G: What, you have a list?
Janelle: I have a list know I have a list because I've forgotten people before and I know that's weird like I know it's fucking weird that I have a list because it feels like a body count. It [looks] like I'm just telling people but that's not what it is. It's literally me, again, wanting to remember all of these people. And also, first of all, I think it's important to know how many people I've slept with. I don't want to be the person who literally just forgets people.

It is evident through her explanation that the expectation with this list is that people keep them so that they are able to tell other people, hence Janelle’s need to clarify that her list is for her memory not to allow her to recount her hookups to other people. For many, the list a tool to remember who they have hooked up with and also an implicit social tool that allows people to then talk about their hookups. Further, these lists symbolize that the person with a hookup list
has hooked up with enough people in college that they are able to construct a list in the first place. The existence of this list is an affirmation in itself and a statement of desirability to the person who created it and the people who are privy to it.

The form of the list deserves some consideration. For one, it is itemized, with one name per line. Some people number their lists in chronological order as well. Hookup culture encourages people to objectify people and to itemize them as a thing and/or memory to be logged into the system that they created on their phones or whatever medium they keep their hookup list. If hookup culture is a market, then hookup lists are the receipts. The fact that hookups can be 1) so numerous and/or 2) so unmemorable that they require the writing of a list is evidence of how people are reduced to objects in this romantic regime. The individuals with whom a person hooked up are not meaningful enough to remember off the top of one’s head, yet are important enough to be kept stored away in a back cabinet, only to emerge when needed and looked for. The forgetting (of a person’s basic identity) in this scenario signifies the transactional aspects of hookups—while one is encouraged to be extremely physically intimate with a person they are also urged to completely neglect that person’s humanity in the process and be as detached as possible. Further, with the list and with hookup culture in general, the more the number of hookups increases, the more people accumulate names on their lists, the more those people forget, and the less value a particular has to the person who they hooked up with. Scarcity in this structure is meaning and as hookup culture strives to be completely meaningless, forgetting is crucial to that goal.

In many ways, the accumulation of capital in hookup culture is a cyclical pattern in which those who are able to partake in hookup culture are then able to learn and grow accustomed to the ways of being that this relationality requires. As a result, by learning and adhering to the
norms and rules of hookup culture, one acquires the skills necessary to keep engaging with this romantic regime. This then allows people to continue to engage and build social capital through the means of accumulating more sexual experiences, more people to add to their lists, and more stories to tell their friends and peers. As will be explained in the next chapter, this system of social capital is selectively inclusive. Certain people who uphold into the hegemonic idea of hookup culture in terms of race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, class, and other identities have a much easier time engaging with hookup culture and thus gaining social capital for those individuals have much fewer barriers to entry than people who deviate from the norm. Because hookup culture is the predominant romantic regime on campus, the social ramifications that it produces are intimately intertwined with the way that social life operates as well. Therefore, those who cannot or do not engage with hookup culture not only suffer romantically and/or sexually from not participating, but also potentially suffer socially as well.

Desire: Biology or Market Dynamics or Both?

As hookup culture is so imbued with neoliberal capitalist principles, then it can also be seen through a lens of market concepts such as supply and demand, scarcity, competition, and hierarchy and inequality. As Illouz wrote,

The triumph of love and sexual freedom marked the penetration of economics into the machine of desire. One of the main transformations of sexual relationships in modernity consists in the tight intertwinement of desire with economics and with the question of value and one’s worth… it is economics that now comes to haunt desire. By this, I mean that generalized sexual competition transforms the very structure of the will and desire, and that desire takes on the properties of economic exchange: that is, that it becomes regulated by the laws of supply and demand, scarcity, and oversupply. (Illouz 2001, 58)

Here, Illouz concisely explained that not only have sexual relationships become intertwined with economics but they have also become a metric for a person’s value and worth. Sexual
relationships take on the rules and principles of economics, which can also be seen through the increase of rationalization in dating and/or hookup culture as mentioned previously.

In a capitalist market, scarcity gives value. In the current romantic regime that prioritizes the objectification of bodies (and some more than others), the ubiquity and the foundation of ‘easy, casual sex’ and the simple access to bodies is necessitated by hookup culture itself in order for it to persist. If hookups were made and understood as hard to come by, then the value of hookups would increase; therefore, they would become more meaningful, which fundamentally goes directly against the hookup script as hookups are supposed to be essentially worthless to a person except for the pleasure they receive during the exchange. Once sex is deemed meaningful and intentional by everyone (and not just conservative and/or religious peoples), then hookup culture and the ways that it necessitates people to exchange their bodies as objects for pleasure would no longer be seen as socially acceptable, let alone encouraged. However, those who opt into hookup culture are widely unable to see all their hookups as meaningless, which is why hookup culture is not a permanent romantic regime but rather a phase before people are willing to be committed, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The role of hookup culture is to be a temporary arrangement for people around college age, and many retire from it within their college years—a majority of my interviewees who once engaged in hookup culture no longer choose to engage because of this inability to maintain meaninglessness in their hookups.

Scarcity seems to also lead to fetishism. As society renders the fit white body as hegemonically beautiful and mainstream, the bodies of color are then rendered as other and more scarce. This othering allows for women of color to be affiliated with certain sexual connotations and may be hypersexualized as a result. Stereotypical college hookup culture has always been for white wealthy students, as it first originates within Greek life on campuses and Greek life has
historically been catered toward white students in particular. Therefore, hookup spaces have always been constructed with a centering on whiteness and so non-white people naturally appear on the periphery and are not seen as a norm. By certain audiences, this may render non-white people in that space as more desirable for reasons steeped in racism and colorism.

Competition is another feature of a market mindset that is evident in hookup culture. People often feel that they are competing against each other for the attention of a particular person. Much of this competition manifests in the comparison between bodies as women relentlessly monitor how their size, shape, skin color, etc. relate to those of others, with the assumption that this would directly affect their hookup chances. Peaches, a Black woman, told me that competition is the reason why she chooses not to tell people who she has a crush on at the time.

Oh, yeah. It's just like a weird like competition and that's another reason why I don't really tell my friends at least who I have a crush on because whenever I have, the girl will either have already hooked up with them or at the next party she's like talking to them and it's just this weird thing where I feel like she's trying to assert her dominance over me or like prove her value in terms of the guys that she can get.

Previous to this comment, Peaches had been talking about being insecure at parties, especially when the night ends and all of her friends had left with other guys, leaving her alone. She’d be left there with feelings of insecurity—“Am I too big? Am I too dark? Do I not look white enough? Like am I intimidating?” In the quote above, Peaches explained that her light-skinned Latina friend tended to go after the men that Peaches had already expressed interest in. She interpreted her friend’s actions as trying to “assert her dominance,” showing how competition can operate among women in hookup culture. In this particular situation, the competition reinforced the way that Peaches experiences colorism in terms of desire and sexuality, as the ‘friend’ who tried to assert her dominance over Peaches was much lighter in skin color than she is. It’s worth underscoring how corporeal this competition is. Her mind doesn’t go to her
qualities as a person (i.e. asking ‘am I cool or smart enough?’) but rather points to qualities that
are arguably out of her control, such as her race, her skin color, and her size. These
characteristics (and also the comparison herself) also make her body and her person harder to
self-objectify, affecting the way that she is able to engage with the hookup market.

Illouz remarked that the effect of the dating market’s digitization is most evident through
the ways in which the hookup and dating circuit become explicitly visual and categorizable for
things that were once less nameable: “the most obvious effect of visualization of the market is
the introduction of ways of ranking which were left implicit in the non-Internet mode of partner
selection.” As mentioned previously, the transportation of dating, romance, and sex onto the
Internet creates a metric upon which people can be assessed by and then ranked. The platforms
are intentionally designed to compare people to one another. For example, Coffee Meets Bagel
(CMB) is a commonly used dating app with the tagline “Online dating can be different. Make
Authentic Connections with Coffee Meets Bagel.” This branding refutes the stigma that online
dating often holds and claiming that CMB can facilitate true “connections” between people. Like
almost all other dating apps, CMB has its users post several photos of themselves. Additionally,
CMB has its users fill out prompts for a bio that include the phrases: “I am…”; “I like…”; “I
appreciate when my date…” as a way to facilitate grounds upon which connection can be made.
However, simultaneously these photos and well-meaning prompts also create a foundation for
the comparison and competition that Illouz talked about. CMB asking its users to answer the
same three prompts literally creates a framework of evaluation within the app that invites making
comparisons between people, both through their photos and the information they choose to
reveal on their profile.
Furthermore, the rationalization of dating and intimacy are evident in blogs that give advice on how to make the “best profile.” Though the CMB advertises its purpose as creating “authentic connections,” there are resources created both by CMB and by independent users to tell people how to get the “best” matches. There are even some blog pages that contain sample answers to the CMB prompts that the blogger explicitly states are available for copy and paste, thus defeating the purpose of authenticity and substituting numerical logic (i.e. swiping with as many people as possible) for a substantive one (i.e. creating a profile that best represents the user). This exemplifies the ways in which Internet dating has encouraged the rationalization process of intimacy where it has become increasingly clear that the aim is to check the “right” boxes so that one gets the “best” matches instead of the matches that would work best for that individual and elicit the intuitive experience that Illouz associates with epiphanic love.

Capitalism views the market as “not compulsion but freedom” (Wood 1999, 6), and hookup culture, likewise, sees this market as “freedom.” The idealized version of hookup culture—which preaches an aversion to commitment and that allows people to have more options, more choices, and more opportunities to have sex with whomever they would like—seems freeing and so full of opportunities one cannot even fathom them. People are invited to enjoy this freedom and “choice,” but, like with capitalism, this socialization does not mean that the freedom that both capitalism and hookup culture promise is inclusive of everyone. Just because there is freedom and/or liberation for some does not mean that there is for all. As Wood explains, capitalism needs “impersonal forces of the market…and if they are in any way coercive, it is simply in the sense that they compel economic actors to act ‘rationally’ so as to maximize choice and opportunity” (Wood 1999, 6). Hookup culture operates on the same principle, as exhibited by the hookup script and the ways in which people have come to
rationalize non-platonic intimacy. Wood, mimicking a canonical Marxist point on the fetishism of commodities, states that “as relations among human beings are mediated by the process of commodity exchange, social relations among people appear as relations among things” (1999, 7), which concisely states how relationships both in and out of hookup culture are frequently viewed in today’s culture as objects through principles of commodity exchange. With the ways in which neoliberal capitalism affects the current romantic regime, the exclusivity and toxicity of hookup culture come as no surprise. People are consequently left with few avenues to create meaningful relationships that are accepting and embracing of the entire person.

**Race and Choice**

Like in any market exchange, the ultimate goal of a hookup is to be chosen and to succeed as the market defines ‘success.’ Therefore, with the idea of choice also comes the desire and the goal to be repeatedly chosen, or in the specific case with hookup culture, the desire to be chosen as someone’s target for the evening. Being chosen once is not enough, the aim is to have liquidity and be flexible so that one is chosen over and over again. What are the implications if you find yourself not chosen? And what is at stake when one fails to be chosen time and time again? As expected, the intersections of capitalism, racism, ableism, classism, and so on, thus dictate the dynamics of this culture, affecting who is afforded liquidity and the ability to be chosen. In other words, the desirability of a person as determined by the media and hegemonic concepts of beauty and attractiveness affects the likelihood for a person to be chosen by another individual.

**Feeling Rules. Feelings Drool**

Though hookup culture is supposed to be feeling-less, all of my participants used emotional terms to describe and discuss their experiences with hookup culture. It seems that
while no one wants to have feelings about hookup culture, they do regardless of whether it’s about the party beforehand, the sex during the hookup, or processing the aftermath and trying to navigate awkwardness. In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild discusses the concept of “emotional labor,” i.e. “labor [that] requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1983, 7). “Emotional labor” is “sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value.” To describe this kind of work in the private sphere, Hochschild coined the terms “emotion work” or “emotion management” (1983, 7). She defines this work as the efforts we employ when “we try to stir up a feeling we wish we had, and at other times we try to block or weaken a feeling we wish we did not have” (Hochschild 1983, 43). This type of work contributes to a larger emotional system, which dictates how people should feel in any given situation through feeling rules and their enforcement. Here, the feeling rules are being called forth by capitalism and then normalized. Hochschild explains that “when elements of that [emotional] system are taken into the marketplace and sold as human labor, they become stretched into standardized social forms” (1983, 13). Here, Hochschild describes the intersection of this emotional system and capitalism, saying that capitalist logic actually constructs the system and the feeling rules that are then rendered implicit and subconscious.

Hochschild describes emotion management as the work one does to make oneself feel a certain way to fit whatever narrative one wants to construct. Hochschild discusses love in light of emotion work, saying that people go to far lengths to make themselves feel a certain way. One woman that she talked about was afraid of showing emotion in a relationship so she tried to change her feelings, told herself that she didn’t have feelings for her partner, and even invented bad things about him so that she wouldn’t develop feelings for this person. This is reminiscent of
the work that many people often perform in hookup culture to avoid expressing emotion that
they believe is not strategic, beneficial, or even efficient.

A common phrase used in the hookup realm is “catching feelings,” which describes the
act of developing feelings for someone in a situation where the development of those non-
platonic feelings is undesired. This saying depicts emotions like an illness or cold one can come
down with, evidencing the negative associations that are affiliated with feeling emotions toward
another person or toward the scenario at hand. In hookup culture, emotions are meant to be
avoided at all cost because they stain a streamlined script that is founded upon detachment.
Andrea told me a story about how she reacted when she discovered that her sexual partner at the
time had caught feelings:

So if you catch feelings then somehow it's like, we're doing it wrong...we were spending
a lot of time together the person ended up catching feelings and they told me. So they
were like, ‘okay, I thought I could just like have sex with you and that would be it but I'm
actually starting to like you’ and then that scared me away really intensely. So I was like,
no this isn't hookup culture. I'm not looking for a relationship. I just got out of a really
long-term relationship. And the reason I'm using is hookup culture in cook a culture is to
avoid that, right? To avoid the relationship aspect. And so when this person expressed
that they wanted a relationship with me now, I kind of cut things off and was like, ‘okay
well for your emotional well-being. I don't think I can, in good conscience, like still
engage with you knowing that you have feelings for me when I don't have feelings for
you.’

In this scenario, Andrea was on the receiving end of someone catching and decided to detach
herself because she had just exited a serious relationship. As evidenced by this story, having
unreciprocated feelings for your hookup partner can lead to a fracturing of the hookup, leading to
its demise. Emotions are a breach of contract for hookup culture because they introduce meaning
to the situation at hand and meaninglessness is the whole point of hooking up (and is often what
draws people to it). The penalty for catching feelings in a hookup may also be an incentive for
students to drink before they go out—the less cognizant they are of their own behaviors, the
slimmer the chance for them to catch feelings for their sexual partner.
The pathologizing of feeling in this colloquialism acts as a diagnosis for those who failed to successfully manage their emotions in a way that adheres to the frequently preferred rational approach to love. According to the script in hookup culture, a person “catching feelings” is an undesired outcome as the script is completely dependent upon emotional detachment in order for the script to work. Peaches told the story of her friend who ended things with someone as a result of her realizing that he was catching feelings for her.

I had another friend who was hooking up with a guy consistently and she like thought he was catching feels and she shut that down real quick…but I think she actually kind of did have feelings for him because she still, you know, talks about him and stuff, but I don't think she like wanted to have feelings.

Here, Peaches described a classic phenomenon in hookup culture when her friend realized that the person she was hooking up with broke their implicit agreement to not involve feelings in their physical intimacy. As a result, she decided to manage both of their emotions for each other by calling things off to avoid anything from developing further, denying her own feelings for this guy in the process.

Peaches continued on to say that with consistent hookups that happen every weekend, it is inevitable that some sort of intimate connection will form between two people despite the mutual agreement to not develop feelings for one another. She said,

I think if you're hooking up with someone like every weekend, you're going to start feeling something for them because you know them. Even if you don't know the person they are, you know their body really well and you spend physical time with them. Yeah, I think you have some form of attachment whether it's like love or like a friendship type of attachment.

Peaches interpreted this as an inherent part of long-term hooking up, thus refuting hookup culture’s claim that the consistent hookup can be devoid of all attachment and only purely a physical relationship. I see this instance as a refutation of the feeling rules that people uphold despite the ways in which their embodied experience may tell them otherwise. Though hookup
culture’s necessitates an intimate relationship with the body, it also seems to promote the denial
of embodied knowledge in favor of adhering to feeling rules that foreclose attachment.

Andrea also shared with me her own personal tendency to catch feelings, which has
ultimately led her to disengage from hookup culture. In her experience, people tend to treat
emotions in hookups as a binding contract that both parties must sign.

I've always been the messy person who catches feelings...Now I'm choosing to not
engage in hookup culture because I found that it would be a weird Catch-22 that would
happen where like I would catch feelings and then the other person would be like, “whoa,
like I thought we explicitly set this out in like a contract.” They treat it very coldly and
try and step away from the situation and be like, “well, we're hooking up so that means
you can't have feelings [and] now that you have feelings like we can't do this anymore
and you've somehow travel transgressed my boundaries, right?”

Andrea outlined the ways hookup culture pushes rationality to the point where emotions feel as
though they must abide by a previous determined contract. Evidently, in Andrea’s experience, if
she broke her side of the contract, she was no longer able to engage in intimacy with this person.

Even her self-identification as the “messy person” signifies how she might be seen by others and
thus how she conflicts with the typical feeling rules. Additionally, she takes personal
responsibility for this personal “failure” to stay detached instead of blaming hookup culture
itself. The quote indicates the way that Andrea’s embodied and emotional experience of the
hookup is completely disregarded when determining the state of the relationship and its future
trajectory and instead the depersonalized, rational script that hookup culture requires is used as a
default. Andrea continued to explain the effects of choosing a rational approach over one that
values her emotions and expressed that the situation ultimately felt unfair and poorly navigated.

So they treated my emotions, which I developed because of our intimacy, as something
that like transgressed a kind of agreement that we had both come to together, which
(although it's true we came to that agreement together at the beginning) to me, the
situation had changed where it's now we're spending time together we're not just hooking
up so it's a different thing. And so I don't want that to happen anymore. Like I don't like
kind of being gaslit into thinking that I am someone who's not a rational individual in a
situation where it's like, 'oh, well you got feelings and I didn't so now like you're the one that's, I don't know, exposed herself, you know?

The use of transgression here shows the ways in which hookup culture views emotions with disdain because they complicate a rational approach to intimacy. It is evident through this excerpt that a personal thing such as sex and physical intimacy is ultimately depersonalized through approaching casual sex via a catch-all script that has no regard for the individual parties involved. Andrea also communicated the emotional harm of this kind of invalidation and erasure of her feelings, saying that she felt “gaslit” into believing that she wasn’t a “rational individual” when rationality does not actually map onto intimate relationships as well as people like to believe it does. In fact, this disjunction is evident simply through the difficulty that people seem to have with the emotion work that is required of people who choose to engage in hookup culture. Ultimately, it seems as though this emotion work, complicated trajectory, and the potential for harm along the way motivated Andrea to withdraw from hookup culture altogether because the labor outweighed the potential gratification.

Another way that “catching feelings” emerged in my interviews was when Bridget was discussing her two simultaneous long-term hookups. Bridget said that she was friends with both of the people she hooked up with and she has agreed to non-exclusive hookups with each of them.

It's nice to be able to have that relationship with multiple people. It prevents me from feeling too, like honestly, I think it prevents me from catching feelings in any kind of way. Not that I think that's super at risk with either of these people but even just the feeling of being monogamous can maybe lead to that. This excerpt was particularly interesting because Bridget located not catching feelings almost as an objective of her non-exclusive hookups, explaining that if she were only hooking up with one of these people then she may actually catch feelings for them. Therefore, it is better that she can
hookup with two people consistently over the same period of time to avoid any kind of commitment that might have been born out of a more monogamous situation. In economic terms, this would be known as ‘hedging,’ which looks like limiting something by conditions. Here, Bridget is hedging by creating conditions for herself (hooking up with two people) so that she will reduce the likelihood that she will catch feelings. Other participants discussed that a long-term hookup with just one person would most likely lend itself to romantic feelings.

Party (Feeling) Rules

March 8th, 2019 was the fateful night of the first ever Crush Party. This event was hosted by two seniors, both white queer students who, together, birthed the idea of having a party in which people would anonymously invite their crushes to this party through a Google form. By inviting them, they also invited them to anonymously invite their crushes, too. Therefore, the result is a guest list of people who are all connected to each other through a long chain of crushes, perhaps both reciprocated and unrequited but no one knows which. A majority of the people in the room most likely did not know who had invited them to the party, but most definitely showed up for the intrigue—the possibility of meeting a person who had invited you, figuring out who might have a crush on you. An invitation to the crush party is a strange profession of love, one that requires little to no vulnerability unless you wish to make your crush known to that person at the crush party. Not even the two hosts knew who had a crush on whom and keeping track of people’s crushes proved to be an impossible task, as the hosts had to send approximately 450 email invitations. The crush network extended to nearly a quarter of the student body.

When I walked into the room around 10:30 that evening, I was struck by the way that the crush party seemed like any old party that would be hosted on the Williams College campus in a
dusty basement of an old frat house. The room was nearly completely dark and the only light that filled the room came from string lights that were hung haphazardly, barely decorating the space. People were talking loudly to one another, falling into groups of people that were normally acquainted—athletes with other athletes, theater people with other theater people, etc. – and other individuals were dancing in the periphery to music being blasted from a speaker. After I actually entered the space, however, I realized that the buzzing energy of the party was very different from a regular Williams College party. The weeks-long build-up to the crush party (though it really only went “viral” in the last few days) allowed for emotions to build and build: nervousness, anticipation, anxiety, and other crush-y feelings. After stewing in the space for a bit of time, I realized that all of that build-up was coming to fruition in people’s nervous, anxious, hyper-aware, insecure behaviors. Combined with alcohol from the bar in the back of the room (mostly wine by the time I got there), these feelings were either masked or heightened.

I came away from that night realizing how hookup culture is just a game of strategy, where each behavior must be intentionally played. Actions are latent with meaning and can be read as fitting (or not fitting) into a script. One misstep and you could expose your cards too early or cause a miscommunication in the already complicated communication lines. For example, at the party you must not seem too eager to be with someone; otherwise you’ll be seen as too clingy so it is important to show them interest, but not too much. Perhaps you’ll flirt with other people, talking closely to them and touching shoulders and/or arms, all the while looking behind you to see if the person you were originally aiming at noticed. Maybe you’ll dance with other people for a while to put on a façade of aloofness. Ultimately, though, if the person you have your eye on is also flirting with other people (while maybe also flirting with you intermittently) then it is likely that they probably aren’t interested in you.
The end of the night tends to be the most crucial aspect of the gathering in terms of hooking up. Multiple people have told me that if the night is ending “don’t leave his side if you want to hookup with him.” Apparently, the end of the night is the time when it’s acceptable to make your intentions known by having more clingy behavior to communicate interest in the other person. Leaving the party is the crucial step—if you make moves to leave and the person your flirtation target does not show any interest in following, then your pursuit was likely unsuccessful. However, if you tell someone that you want to leave and they say they wish to go with you, you’re likely in a good position. Particularly, at Williams, everyone ends the night with late night food at Snack Bar. So inviting someone to go to snack bar often implicitly implies: ‘I’m leaving, are you coming with me?’ and if they say yes, then you can proceed to the next level in the hookup game.

Nested within this particular behavioral script is the underlying norm that one should express as little interest as is necessary to get a person to go home with you. Therefore, sometimes it is strategically wise to not explicitly invite someone to leave with you but to simply tell them that you are leaving and see how they respond. The key is never to explicitly make your intentions known but to, bit by bit, play your cards intentionally to see if they’re taken up or left on the table. A play that’s too obvious may backfire and, depending on who you are and what you look like, too little may lead you without a hookup for a night, leaving people to ultimately play the Goldilock’s game.

My interpretation of the Crush Party is that it is a perfect example of how emotional vulnerability must be linked to anonymity in order exist among the Williams student body. The Crush Party is evidence that there are people pining after others in a way that is not just purely sexual but they just have no means to channel this energy except through hookup culture, similar
to Wood’s idea of market compulsion. The success of the Crush Party indicates that the demise of dating culture is certainly not because people aren’t interested, as the sheer volume of invitees shows that crushes are happening in great multitudes. It seems that because hookup culture prioritizes rationality over emotion, people feel as though there isn’t truly an outlet by which they can actualize their crushes because there is no space to express emotion in the hegemonic romantic regime.

The rhetoric around hookup culture as a game is yet another way to understand the way that non-platonic relationality has been rationalized through capitalism. The objective of the game is essentially an emotional balancing act: to accumulate as few feelings as possible while still making your intentions clear. Hochschild would likely interpret this as a game of emotion management through micropractices or small cues. The game is one of emotion manipulation, not just management, where a person must play their cards strategically to make the other person feel desire just enough to spark action.

Feeling Rules and Commitment

As mentioned previously, hookup culture is all-encompassing and has been written into the hegemonic narrative of romance to the point where some folks believe that relationality outside of hookup culture is still impacted by it. In her interview, Turquoise explained the extent to which she believes this is true:

It has become so much the norm that I think it has failed us in a way where if somebody does want to be in a more committed relationship, it makes it challenging. My grandma [told me], “my back in my day like a boy just asked you out and then you went on a date” but like right now because of hookup culture. There are so many different stages to a relationship. You're just hooking up you are casually dating but not exclusive then you are exclusive. But are you open? Are you closed? Is it one-sided or two-sided? Are we living together? Are we not living together?
In Turquoise’s perspective, hookup culture has failed because it leaves no space or potential for commitment or vulnerability. Her listing of the “different stages” of a relationship seem to act as a list of barriers one must overcome to figure out the ambiguity that hookup culture thrives on. These questions serve as blockages that may actually lead to approaching a relationship that would allow for commitment or even just foster healthy communication. If hookup culture is premised upon a lack of emotional investment and a fleeting temporality, then the structure and script do not endorse these kinds of ambiguities to be cleared up, let alone talked about.

Turquoise continued on to say:

I think it has complicated things. I feel like if you like somebody you [shouldn’t] worry about coming off as needy or vulnerable. I think hookup culture has robbed us of those moments because there’s a lot more thinking that happens after the hook up. Like am I allowed to text them? Will I come off as too needy? Was it just a one-time thing? And it’s just like there are so many assumptions that and I feel like people just don’t have conversations.

This excerpt gives a bit more insight into what exactly the feeling rules of hookup culture actually look like. From Turquoise’s description, one must conduct themselves in a way that doesn’t portray them as needy or too attached; thus, the feeling rule asks people to be indifferent. Perhaps a different characterization of the feeling rule would be that it is, in fact, an anti-feeling rule—those who can either not feel or deny their feelings are able to navigate hookup culture with much more ease than those who do not or cannot. Furthermore, a fellow student who is a woman of color said to me:

Hookup culture advantages people who don’t care about what people feel. The people who don’t care are the ones who do well in hookup culture.

Not only are people advised to not be attuned to how they are personally feeling, but they are also incentivized to not be considerate of other people’s feelings and well-being. This both fuels
and is fueled the way that people are merely objects within this romantic regime, not conscious, feeling human beings.

**Choice and Commitment:**

In heterosexual hookup culture, expressed level of commitment can act as a metric of emotions in the relationship at hand. Power dynamics often manifest so that women are disadvantaged in comparison to the male parties involved. The emotional scripts of hookup culture disproportionately detriment women not because they are “biologically” more predisposed to emotionality (as some may argue), but because of the gendered way that people are socialized to view emotions and process them. In particular, the toxic masculinity that men are supposed to strive toward encourages a stunting of feeling whereas women are allowed to emote free but only if their emotions are publicly palatable. Illouz claimed that historically, women want to commit while men resist commitment.

...men express a strategic attempt to establish some distance from their respective women by creating an emotional boundary because women are much more likely to want to commit to a relationship, to want it earlier, and to want exclusivity (2011, 82).

Bogle found this to be the case on campus, mentioning that:

Many students, particularly women, often hoped that a hookup would evolve into some version of a relationship. Therefore, all hookup encounters cannot be characterized as ‘casual sex’ or ‘one-night stands’ when often one of the parties is hoping that it will lead to ‘something more,’ and, at least some of the time, it does. (2007, 29)

Here, the question seems to be: why people are even turning to hookup culture in the first place in hope for something more when that is explicitly against the purpose of hooking up?

It seems that the desire for something more is alive and well at Williams as well. Lily too observed that women tended to be more emotionally committed to the hookup at Williams:

I've heard a lot of girls complain about the hookup culture and how guys usually are the ones not wanting to initiate any feelings. Just make a purely physical thing. There doesn't seem to be a big incentive to date at least in the circle of people I've seen...It usually ends
up with the girl getting hurt and then the guy is off saying, ‘oh, she's crazy’ or whatever but it's a very like one-sided relationship where one person cares a lot more than the other.

Bogle also found this in her data and expanded beyond this gendered example of emotional labor and work, explaining that “discovering that a relationship [was] not a probable outcome of a hookup encounter was difficult for some (usually women) who wanted ‘something more,’ but they felt powerless to get what they want. Those unhappy with the hookup script had to come to terms with the fact that it was the ‘only game in town,’ at least on campus” (Bogle 2007, 49).

Andrea mentioned this in her interview, saying that for her it seemed like there were no other options when looking for a romantic connection at Williams.

What options were presented to me were engaging in the hookup culture. It wasn't like there were other options in terms of like dating at Williams because I don't think people like actively date long-term unless it's like one of those like freshman year relationships til senior year relationships.

Andrea noted here that people at Williams aren’t actively dating and those who get locked into relationships find themselves in ultra-committed relationships that last a person’s entire time at Williams. In her experience, there is no “dating around,” as there used to be – people don’t just try things out to see how things may work between two people.

An alumna, Rose, who graduated in 2014, slightly complicated Andrea’s statement, saying that people at Williams did date, but there wasn’t a dating culture. Those who got in relationships seemed to be extremely committed, existing at one end of the spectrum, whereas everyone else existed on the other side with less commitment and more casualness.

I think I would say there's a hookup culture as opposed to say like a dating culture, not that people don't date. I dated. I have friends that dated but the majority of people from my perception were not involved in like long-term serious relationships and it's much more common for people to have casual hookups, that being a very broad thing that people define different ways, but casual hookups.
Evidently, people perceive that hookup culture is the mainstream route for engaging with non-platonic relationships specifically at Williams, but also at colleges and universities across the nation.

Bogle suggests a few explanations for this, one concluding that because people were getting married later, seriously dating in college was not a focus—specifically, “if students do not intend to marry until at least three years after graduation, there is no significant pressure to find their future spouse during their college years (2008, 54).” Rose had her own theory around why folks at Williams don’t date:

I mean I think part of it is [the] idea that in college you do this thing. I think there's a certain belief that people buy into. Especially it Williams, but probably true in a lot of other places that people are very stressed and focused on their school work and focus on all the other things. They feel like they don't have the time or emotional capacity to have relationships.

In other words, Rose’s comment addresses something larger about Williams and its peer institutions. Students nowadays are so work and career-oriented, they are unwilling to prioritize the work that it takes to foster a more committed relationship. This tendency speaks to a larger fact that capitalism has come to control student lives at large, facilitating a work ethic that obstructs the students’ ability to be vulnerable and create meaningful relationships. Williams, as well as other elite institutions of higher education, foster and promote a work culture under the guise of “elite learning” that pushes its students so hard that they are forced to make the decision between doing well in school (and all the results that come of it like a good career, financial stability, etc.) and investing in relationships that take time and work (yet have potential risk as well). However, the paradox here is that students avoid the emotion work of relationships by opting into the emotion work of hookups, which seems to have a high cost for low return under the facade of low cost and high return.
Conclusion

When people think of romance, they often think about the projection of love that people get from the media—the romantic comedy plotline kind of love that is passionate, embodied, and completely irrational, but this portrayal of love is far from how people are now navigating love and sex today. Capitalism and market principles have infiltrated the way people now approach intimacy, making it possible for hookup culture to be the hegemonic romantic regime for young adults. The different elements of a working market can be seen here, where the bodies are the products, the party is the marketplace, and the hookup is the exchange with the aim of accumulation of social capital. In order to successfully navigate this market, neoliberalism has created the idea that an individual must take personal responsibility for their own success in the market, completely neglecting the outside forces that make hookup culture the way it is. These market principles, the rationalization of intimacy, and the delegitimization of feeling in this realm all also, in turn, dictate the ways that people are able to feel (or not feel) in this space. Using Arlie Hochschild’s theories of emotion management and emotion work, the ways in which capitalism’s understanding of labor becomes imprinted upon and normalized in how people allow themselves to feel and emote become evident. As a result, this causes a variety of negative feelings, causing people to feel displeasure in their romantic lives and even as though they cannot participate in hookup culture all together because of the ways in which the capitalist ways of thinking in hookup culture are not kind, empowering, or whole.
CHAPTER III: WOMEN OF COLOR AND HOOKUP CULTURE

Sitting in a common room during my sophomore year, I found myself gossiping with a group of friends who were all Asian-American women. We’re catching up on each other’s weekends— talking about what people did, what parties they went to, and as these conversations often go, people’s hookups. One of the people at the table brings up a name and then another friend says “oh...I hooked up with him last year.” There’s a pause and then another person mentions that they know two other East Asian American women on campus who have hooked up with this person also. There’s a small lull in conversation and everyone exchanges the same look— we’re all mentally noting the discovery of yet another Asian fetish suspect at Williams, marking him as someone to stay away from and be wary of in party spaces. This kind of conversation among Asian women on campus isn’t rare— it’s actually a survival mechanism for Asian women to avoid fetishization by men who have been identified as having Yellow Fever, the colloquial term for fetishizing people of Asian descent.

Hookup Culture: Not for Everyone

None of the women I interviewed had raving reviews about hookup culture. In fact, only small minority of individuals had a neutral to positive experience with hookup culture as a romantic regime that governs conventions around sexual relationships on campus. Not one person, including the white women I interviewed, believed that hookup culture was the healthiest script for relationships. For the women of color I interviewed, hookup culture was “a lot of fun” at its best and “toxic and disruptive” at its worst. All of my participants seemed to see hookup culture as a temporary option in the absence of what they would have preferred more— something that seemed to resemble more of a committed relationship, with sexual intimacy as
well as emotional intimacy, care, and communication. Isabel’s thoughts on hookup culture were the following:

I don't think casual hookup culture is long-term sustainable for me. Like that's not how I want to engage, but I could see how it could be something I’d pursue for a period of time. Isabel then continued on by saying that hookup culture is “another space where these systems of oppression come out to play. And we recognize that and so in that way I would say it's bad.” It is important to note that some of the inequities of hookup culture operate on the axis of gender, meaning that, in some cases, women across the board feel their negative effects. However, participation in hookup culture and other social spaces are also affected by race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and other identities. Many of the inequities that emerge in hookup culture affect women of color of different races and ethnicities in ways specific to their skin color and physical features, which indicate their distance from whiteness. This chapter is devoted to exploring and explaining how racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression shape the experiences that women of color have with hookup culture as they try to navigate its less-than-straightforward script.

White Women: A Control Group

The three white women I interviewed seemed to have mixed feelings about hookup culture—many of them had positive experiences with hookups in the past but had also been hurt in the process. Lily expressed her ambivalence by saying:

I think it's something that I've gone really back and forth with like something that I wish I wasn't a part of and then other times, I'm totally fine with being a part of and I think that usually would have to do if I have feelings for whatever person I'm hooking up with at that time.

Throughout her interview, Lily outlined many different positive and negative facets of hookup culture to her. Commenting on the positive, she said:
Well, I do like I enjoy it. [...] It's not like one sided, it is very satisfactory to both people. I'm not saying that like I'm insecure and I need a guy's validation but it's very validating. I think even if that's not the pure reason why you are doing it, it's just very reassuring that like even if you don't at the moment have somebody like a romantic partner, you like still have you still have people that could be your sexual partners.

For Lily, hookup culture provides some validation and casual intimacy if she craves it.

Evidently, hookup culture has worked for her in the past in a way that allows her to confidently navigate its expectations. Lily’s main dissatisfaction seemed to be connected to the way hooking up works in place of dating, the lack of communication and transparency that is normalized in hookup culture, and the social ramifications of hooking up when people gossip about and judge another person for their choices.

I think the further I got into hookup culture, I realized its downsides. I was looking around me at other women who had been affected. Particularly, it would be a situation where like they were really invested in the guy and then he was not back— not invested at all and then [they would] end up getting hurt and then it would often cause tension between people. I had a friendship last year that was ruined because of hookup culture. The above quotation encapsulates all three of the complaints— first, Lily explained that she would often see how women would be hurt by the discrepancy in non-physical intimacy between the two parties and this difference made people feel as though they couldn’t effectively communicate with the other person even if they had wanted to. Lily went on to talk about this friendship that was ruined “because of hookup culture,” saying that people’s propensity to gossip and talk about the weekend’s hookups and who people are hooking up with managed to make things messy between Lily and her friend.

Bridget’s take on hookup culture was similarly mixed. Having gone through many different forms of romance or non-platonic intimacy on this campus, Bridget said she supported and enjoyed casually hooking up but that at the same time it felt limiting to her.

I really I love the idea and practice of like casually hooking up. That's been like very honestly, very healing for me and like a big part of my growth in the past year is just learning to navigate that and feel empowered in that. At the same time, the idea of having like a one-size-fits-all culture is really sad.
Bridget explained that a lot of the joy of her experience came from being able to navigate things in private and also to figure out the script on her own terms, finding herself at a place with hookup culture where she found intimacy that was long-term but not romantically committed. She said that her most formative and important casual hookup experiences didn’t come from the College’s party scene, but instead were two separate situations where one hookup developed from a past friendship and another emerged from a Tinder match. Bridget said she had experience being on Hoxsey in previous years but she “didn’t really feel in control of participating in that as much as I did figuring out how I wanted to do hookup at Williams in the last year.” Among my other interviewees, Bridget was one of the few if not only people who was able to get hookup culture and casual intimacy to work for her well without her ending up in a relationship with one of her partners. Much of this I believe is due to her whiteness as well as her privilege as a skinny, conventionally attractive white woman.

Violet, the third white woman I interviewed seemed to not interested in casually hooking up and therefore found hookup culture to not serve her well. She said that she had only ever had a one-night stand once:

I think never been someone who's been like just like a hook up like one that I've like literally that's only ever happened to me once [...] I know people who prefer to just like hook up with people never have anything like substantial come out of that, but for me, I've almost always had like a substantial relationship come out of someone who I've originally hooked up with.

Violet doesn’t identify as a ‘hookup culture person,’ yet still engages with hookup culture as a way to find someone to be physically intimate with for extended periods of time. It seems that Violet was able to achieve the kind of substantive relations that many women approach hookup culture wanting. She doesn’t do one night stands, but she will engage with the script of hookup culture to arrive at a destination that more resembles a committed relationship. However, she is
able to identify that she does not actually like hookup culture itself, even though she is able to navigate it and make it work for her. I believe in this situation, Violet engages in hookups only because it is the only option available for her to get what she wants more ideally—a relationship. This sentiment is one she explicitly expressed in her interview and is also one that a majority of other women also stated—that they were, at the time, in a relationship or would like to be in one. Luckily for Violet, the “something more” is within the realm of possibility for her in ways that are not accessible to other women. In fact, most women who go into hookups looking for something more certainly do not find what they are seeking.

Women of Color: An ‘Experimental’ Group

While women of color often had similar opinions to white women about the ways that hookup culture seems to continually fail them; their experience of hookup culture differs greatly in terms of depth and quality of displeasure. Most women seem to take issue with the ways that hookup culture operates so pervasively that other romantic regimes cannot co-exist with it, but women of color are also struggling with the ways that they have to fear racialization and fetishization on top of the personal danger that exists in those spaces and the worries that white women have about communication and gossip.

Andrea had a staunchly negative view on hookup culture, saying that it has complicated her relationship with herself and impacted the way that her friends have been able to grow.

I think it creates a lot of like complications about the way you see yourself. So in myself and in my friends, it's really been kind of toxic and disruptive towards their like growth. It distracts more than it like fulfills. So I don't get fulfillment from it. I don't think the friends that I've talked to who engage with hookup culture get fulfillment from it unless it turns into a romantic relationship...that’s where I’ve seen positive outcomes.

Here, she explained that positive results are often rooted in her friends finding some form of commitment. Andrea followed up this statement by explaining that hookup culture changes her
self image by making her settle for less because of what is made available through the hookup script.

It just makes me, [...] feel less than what I am, accepting treatment that is not up to what I think I deserve you know? So it's like accepting less than what I've told myself I should accept and also for my friends. So when they come to me and they like tell me they've had like a bad hookup or they just don't feel satisfied by something...both of us are kind of just like yeah, 'we're never going to do that again' and then inevitably we do. Previously, Andrea mentioned that her partners in hookup culture have neglected to treat her in a way that prioritized her pleasure, making her leave her hookups feeling indifferent at best:

I've also accepted just like not orgasming during a hookup because I'm just like, 'well, I just want this to be whatever, it doesn't really matter if I'm fully satisfied or not because it's just a hook-up, right?' So yeah, they haven't left me feeling fulfilled or satisfied or happy, really, it's just kind of like, ‘well that's done,’ you know? If that makes sense. So yeah, I find that it's not satisfying in the way that it's sold to be. Like it might be satisfying for men, you know.

Andrea’s reported apathy serves as the antithesis of what hookup culture is supposed to bring: pleasure. She is not only apathetic about the interactions themselves, which she says are not satisfying, but she has seemingly given up completely on advocating for her pleasure in a hookup because of how expected it is that her pleasure won’t be satisfied. Andrea then described one of her friends who she said hooks up with someone every two weeks, explaining that she believes this friend is still stuck in hookup culture because her friend doesn’t know an alternative way of accessing intimacy.

She hasn't had that long-term like relationship that has been satisfying and hookup culture at Williams is kind of only thing that's presented. There's no alternatives to that because it's like dating doesn't exist. It feels like... it might be kind of an intimacy thing where it's like: ‘I want intimacy.’ Where is the only place I can get intimacy? It's hookups so that's where I'm going to go.

The predicament Andrea describes when she talks about her friend is a common complaint among women at Williams: women stick to hookup culture not because they firmly stand by hookup culture, but because they believe it is their only option for accessing intimacy.
Turquoise also discussed this— her personal opinion on hookup culture is that it’s “definitely a lot of fun,” but she had some reservations about it as well:

I think hookup culture is like this weird thing where it has become so much the norm that I think it has failed us in a way where if somebody does want to be in a more committed relationship, it makes it challenging. Because like my grandma talks about how back in her day like a boy just asked you out and then you went on a date, but like right now because of hookup culture there are so many different stages to a relationship....Yeah, and I think hookup culture has robbed us of those moments because there's a lot more thinking that happens after the hook up. Like am I allowed to text them? Do I like come off as too needy? Was it just a one-time thing? And it's just like there are so many assumptions and I feel like people just don't have conversations.

Hookup culture exists, for Turquoise, in a way that makes it impossible for people who want commitment to enter a relationship where that is acceptable. Throughout this particular excerpt of her interview, she also talked about how the structure of hookup culture often necessitates many phases in order to approach a relationship but the conversations to facilitate those transitions often do not happen. From other interviews, clear and direct communication is not normalized— as hookup culture is supposed to be carefree and meaningless— which increases people’s chances of hurt in this script. The structure of the script includes both ambiguity and non-communication, two norms that resultantly work together to create confusion and harm.

Wade’s analysis echoes the themes from Turquoise’s interview. Wade wrote that to her students, “open communication in general seemed strange and new...dating felt weird to them in part because it required that they be at least a little honest about their intentions” (2017, 237). The discomfort with open communication is indicative of its absence on most college campuses when it comes to conversing about intimacy and expectations around it.

In the end, Andrea has decided to no longer engage with hookup culture, in part because of how it’s forced her to settle and make compromises. This sentiment is unfortunately one that
many other women also expressed with their experiences of hookup culture. She no longer wanted to engage in behaviors that did not make her feel valued and like her full self.

It's definitely like a self-worth decision. It's more like I'm not going to because in situations that I have hooked up with people. I've had to reduce my self into lesser and I want the next person I engage with physically to also care about my emotional well-being and care about me as a person beyond just like the benefits they can receive from my body that makes sense.

Like Andrea, a majority of my interviewees expressed that hookuping was not what they wanted if they were not already in a monogamous, committed relationship— regardless if they were white or not, queer or straight, wealthy or poor. Despite hookup culture’s purpose of pleasure, it failed to deliver even that for women like Andrea and her friend. This byproduct of hookup culture may be experienced by women no matter their race, according to my data.

**Does Hookup Culture Please Me or Do I Please Hookup Culture?**

In my time at Williams, when I’ve asked a woman whether her heterosexual hookup was ‘good,’ I’ve too often been met with apathy or a lack of enthusiasm. “It was fine,” they’ll say or “it happened” is another common response. For the amount of effort, anticipation, and preparation that goes into setting the stage for a potential hookup, women are just not getting enough out of it. I have rarely ever heard a woman say that she had a one-night stand with a guy and say that it was an overwhelmingly positive experience. In the rare chance that it happened, there was always pretext and somewhat of a pre-existing relationship with that person.

Statistics back this anecdotal evidence up. The Online College Social Life Survey indicates that 84% of women reported that they enjoyed their last hookup only “somewhat” (Wade 2017, 25). In heterosexual hookup culture, there is a massively evident disparity between the number of orgasms that women have and that men have. Wade reports that the ratio is approximately “one or two orgasms for every three that men enjoy” and another survey showed that “hookups in men are more than twice as likely as women to have an orgasm” (2017, 159).
This difference in pleasure is often attributed to a biological difference—men, due to their constant desire to have sex, orgasm much more easily whereas women’s complex “biology” and sexual reserved-ness make it so it is more difficult to make women orgasm. However, statistics show that this is untrue; queer women “report two to three times as many orgasms as heterosexual ones— as many, in fact, as heterosexual men” (Wade 2017, 159), meaning that it is possible to make women orgasm, it is just a matter of prioritization and attention to equity in pleasure. Wade found that this disparity in pleasure is really only present in hookup culture. Logistically, this may be true simply because of the unfamiliarity, newness, and awkwardness affiliated with being physically intimate with a new partner. According to Wade, “women in [heterosexual] relationships are having seven times as many orgasms as women hooking up for the first time” (2017, 159). However, while orgasms in hookups may be less feasible because of the situation, people seem to believe that it mostly has to do with heterosexual men not giving their sexual partner enough priority. But the statistics on heterosexual relationships show that it’s not that men don’t know how to pleasure women, it’s that they tend to be unwilling to if it is not someone they are committed to and care about.

My interviews reveal that even this dynamic is racialized, with men treating certain woman in particular ways that are correlated to the color of their skin. For example, both Janelle and Peaches, two beautiful Black women, told me about instances in which the (white) men they were hooking up with were unwilling to even touch them.

In Janelle’s words:

Men would not touch me or wouldn't try and make me come [...] The first black boy I hooked up at Williams was the first guy to ever go down on me...when I was only with white men and had previously only been with white people none of them did that, slash,

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7 The word ‘biology’ is put in quotations because associating one’s genitals to womanhood is an irrelevant point, as the two are not dependent upon one another. The quotations demarcate this distinction, clarifying that I have no desire to promote and perpetuate the transphobic discourse that is often inherent in these discussions.
would touch me. There was one of the moments where I was like, ‘wow, like every single guy I've ever hooked up with has came through me blowing him or really making sure to be considerate about making sure that something happened for him.’ Whereas that has never happened for me with any of these people.

Though Wade discusses a difference in orgasms and pleasure across gender, she does not mention how this can also be racialized. Yet it’s evident through Janelle’s that men, particularly white men, were unwilling to even touch her let alone perform oral sex on her. This kind of treatment seemed to be particular to Black women and was not a grievance I heard from other women of color nor from white women. Peaches had similar experiences as Janelle in this regard. She said:

There's also little things you can see if they're looking at you in the eyes, they hold your hand, like any kind of [thing] that makes you feel like you have as much autonomy as they do but sometimes it feels like you're there to please them and it's this really sick feeling where I'm like, ‘oh no, like they can like check me off this list now.’

Here, Peaches discusses the way that objectification not only manifests through gaze in the party setting but also, ultimately, in the bedroom as well. The unwillingness to touch Black women’s bodies is a distancing mechanism that renders these women as merely sex objects, to be used and not to be held. More violently, Peaches also retold some of her stories in this way too:

I've had multiple white guys just try to slip their dick in my ass or something like that or try to stick a finger in or slip and it's like that's exactly when I know. I'm like, "oh like you are really into like ass play and you're into that and that's why this is happening." And that's really crazy.

Peaches’ quotation is an even more vivid image of the way that men on campus objectify Black women, particularly their butts. Janelle also mentioned this to me as well, saying:

People who [I] have hooked up with who have been really interested in my butt...I'm not into anal shit, but I like people grabbing my ass, but there's a way in which people have done that that has felt very racialized because like I am a curvy person and those are, you know, racialized components of my body…

Both of these anecdotes from Black women show how men play into the racial, sexual stereotype of Black women having large butts. The physical grabbing or slipping shows the ways in which
desire that comes from sexual stereotypes manifest in assumptions about what men can take from
their Black partners and/or what they think their Black woman-identifying partners will desire.
Non-black men assume that Black women want to have anal sex or participate in anal play
because of the sexual stereotypes around Black women that go uninterrogated.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the controlling images of black women, defining ‘controlling images’ as stereotypes or images that are “designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of daily life” (1990, 77). Collins discussed how Black women have been objectified as other in four variations of controlling images, one of these being “the jezebel, whore, or ‘hoochie,’” the function of which is to stereotype all Black women as sexually aggressive. This, in turn, justifies the sexual assaults that White slave owner men committed against Black slave women. The ‘jezebel’ label characterizes Black women with “sexual appetites [that] are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a ‘freak’” (Collins 1990, 91). This kind of image can be seen through Peaches’ experience, when multiple white men at parties have tried to engage her in anal play. Anal sex in any of its forms is stigmatized; thus, this perception of Black women as deviant or ‘freak’ as well as the cultural fetishization and iconization of the Black woman’s butt are likely to culminate in problematic and potentially traumatizing experiences that Peaches and other Black women have encountered in hookups.

Rose actually told me a story about her being characterized as a ‘freak’ at Williams during her time here. Rose is a mixed race (though she sometimes identifies as Black) queer woman who graduated in 2014. She recalled a story about a white guy she was hooking up with
had told his friends about her. Supposedly these friends had talked to people from another entry and had news to report back to her.

They had been talking to some people from another entry about me. And I don't know who they were but the people had said like, 'oh, [Rose], I hear she's a freak on the dance floor.' I was just like, 'oh okay whatever.' I don't know what that means—it could be the lot of different things. But I do think words like 'freak' can be racially charged. And I do think especially when we're talking about black women like getting like hyper-sexualized.

Rose being called a freak as someone who reads as Black harkens back to the historical stereotypes and controlling images that Collins discusses. Though Rose may not have been called a ‘freak’ in the exact way that Collins defines it, the social connotations were certainly present and, most importantly, were felt by Rose herself. In this situation, she was demarcated by her peers as a sexual other, a label that is often applied to women of color in these spaces. Additionally, the people said that Rose was a ‘freak on the dance floor,’ specifying a particular location that is highly charged with sexual tension and making clear that her being called a ‘freak’ has inherently sexual qualities. Though Rose says the racial connotations are not explicit in this comment, she had her speculations.

It could be the lot of different things. But I do think words like 'freak' can be racially charged. And I do think especially when we're talking about black women like getting like hyper-sexualized—well, hypersexualized in some ways and like undersexualized and having their sexuality erased in other ways. I think I experienced both of those things to certain extent, but I don't have any real concrete things.

Rose’s speculations about the usage of the word ‘freak’ and her inability to remember concrete examples of racialized sexualization that she experienced both speak to a deeper trend that racism in hookup culture is insidious and can be easily obscured, or written off. Rose explained that Black women are constantly existing at the extremes of the spectrum and never in the center because hovering there would also mean that Rose would have to be white. As evidenced here, the hookup script racializes Black women’s bodies to be too sexualized or desexualized and to be
the “right kind of sexy” one would have to inhabit a white body. Rose said that she definitely experienced this paradoxical approach to Black women’s sexuality at Williams, where she felt both hypersexualized and simultaneously erased in her Blackness.

Janelle’s and Peaches’ experiences with not being touched by white men also follows Collins’ theory. If Black women are othered, sexual objects within a system that normalizes controlling images that “provid[e] ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression,” then it is more than likely that their pleasure will be deprioritized to the point that men will think it is acceptable to not touch them during physical intimacy (Collins 1990, 77). Though Black women are not unique to this kind of objectification, as women commonly experience the deprioritization of their pleasure in hookups, they experience a particular branch that is informed by their Blackness, otherness, and the histories that are closely tied to the perception of Black women’s bodies.

**Pre-emptive Fetishization of Women of Color**

The experiences of racialization in physical intimacy that Janelle and Peaches have experienced also manifests in the sexual lives of other women of color as well. In my time at Williams, the grapevine has brought me many stories of white men asking women of color to talk dirty to them in their native language, making racialized assumptions and/or compliments about their bodies, and saying microaggressive things about hair and body parts. These are all common symptoms of racial fetish, “a person’s exclusive or near-exclusive preference for sexual intimacy with others belonging to a specific racial out-group” (Zheng 2016). While this is the clean-cut academic definition, people have struggled to understand how to socially diagnose someone with a racial fetish— how many women in a row do you have to date and/or hook up with to be a fetishizer? Ella echoed this labelling confusion:
I hear a lot about yellow fever and that is a concept that comes up a lot when I hear about party culture or hookup culture. [...] I think this happened in one of our meetings. Somebody was like ‘how many times does a person have to date an Asian woman for it to become yellow fever?’ And then somebody was like ‘twice or once,’ I forget.

Colloquially, I’ve heard people try to categorize people with a particular racial fetish, saying that a label that can be applied to people who have hooked up with multiple people of a particular racial or ethnic background in succession. Ashley explained her experience with finding out this information through stalking a guy she was seeing on Facebook:

...only afterwards did I realize like the second person, the third person and like literally all of his Facebook profile was with other Asian women.

Facebook, Instagram, and other social media stalking has proven to be an important method in vetting people with racial fetishes; if a person has a couple photos with multiple women of the same race or ethnicity, they are likely to be subject to suspicion or even questioning. Others may add on the qualifier that racial fetishes become particularly clear when the person in question has been sexually or romantically involved with people of a certain race/ethnicity but is not friends with anyone of that identity. For example, if a white man only hooks up with Black women but is not associated with the Black community and has no Black friends, people are likely to label that person with ‘jungle fever,’ a term to describe people, usually men, with a particular affinity for Black folks.

However, often the tell-tale signs are people’s words or behaviors toward women of color. For example, Andrea told me a story about her friend, another Latina, who was hooking up with a white man on campus.

[He] like insisted on speaking Spanish to her, because he takes Spanish and I guess speaks Spanish. She was really uncomfortable with that.

The assumption by this man that Andrea’s friend would be willing to speak Spanish with him indicates that he, first, assumed that she could speak Spanish and, second, that her racial otherness and racial performance were available to him to use for his own pleasure. Spanish here
is a racialized linguistic code. This would never be asked of from a white woman; she would not be expected to share anything more than her body with the other party. However, if one is a woman of color, they also bring in the cultural connotations that their bodies carry, intentionally or unintentionally. Furthermore, the bodies of women of color often get tied with a linguistic and/or cultural otherness that adds to or is the source of sexual gratification in the hookup. Though the heterosexual hookup script deems the transaction as purely casual and for pleasure only, women of color, because of gendered expectations, are supposed to carry the burden of pleasing the other person as well as be representative of their community and offering up the “benefits” of being ethnically Other to their temporary partner for the night. What is expected here is a contained expression of ethno-racial identity, manifesting in a form that is appealing to the dominant classes.

Charlotte, a mixed race Jamaican woman, said that with romance at both at Williams and elsewhere, “you always have to worry about people like fetishizing or like being like like exotic like because that's creepy and weird.” When I asked her if she’s ever experienced this before, she said:

C: Yeah, I experienced that a little bit at Williams. Like I hooked up with this one guy and I found out later on that he hooked up with like two other Jamaican girls like a one-month span so that's kind of creepy.
G: Was he white?
C: Yeah, and then just mixed girls. This is like, I don't want to make this sound off the cuff or anything, but like black guys are really into you when you're mixed for some reason. That's like kind of a fetish-y thing. Not all Black guys, but people do that and like will like tell you. That’s just like kind of weird and creepy, too.
G: what do you mean by…
C: like ‘I love like mixed girls.’ I figured that it happens with white guys too like 'ooh exotic person.' Like I'm from Long Island-- I'm not exotic. Also, you shouldn't ever be saying that about women's bodies and stuff.
Charlotte here explained an experience she had with a student while at Williams— this story seems reminiscent of many others that I’ve heard from women of color at Williams. It seems that the process of finding out someone may have a particular racialized sexual history is always through word of mouth and gossip. Women talk to one another in attempt to keep themselves and each other safe. These community networks seem to be crucial to avoiding potential fetishizers. As illustrated in the opening anecdote, it seems as though a purpose of talking about your weekend’s hookups (while often acting as a time for bragging or accumulation of respect from your peers) could also be a way to vet people and see if they are known to have a special affinity for women of a particular racial or ethnic identity. However, while sharing about one’s hookup from the weekend is often a time for potential gain in social capital, for women of color this also has the risk of retroactive devaluation. Specifically speaking, if a woman of color has a great time hooking up with someone who people suspect to have a racial fetish and only finds out later that they have that particular affinity, then the reaction is often one of separation and devaluation. Though it may have been enjoyable in the moment, that woman is likely to rewrite the memory and think back on the hookup as a bad experience, a burned memory.

Anna also discussed the fear of being fetishized and being objectified to a box to check off on one’s sexual to-do list. She told me a story about how the men in her abroad program treated her in daylight versus night time:

It's like okay, whatever like all of a sudden I was not worthy of sometimes even being acknowledge[d] when I walk[ed] into a room, you know, and it became clear to me. It's like, oh you wanted me to be something on your list of things to like just check off and say like, 'oh you've had this experience.'

She says that this kind of temporary objectification means that with men (including men of color), she doesn’t feel as though they are willing to commit to her, she explains “I’m like the safe medium, but like still not good enough for you to want to make things official.” The image
of being checked off a list also relates back to the neoliberal market strains running through the script of hookup culture. Anna elaborated on this idea more in-depth as it manifests at parties in particular:

No like I don't want to just be the cutie with the booty. Yeah, like there's more to me than that...so it's a backhanded compliment.

In this scenario, Anna said that being called the ‘cutie with the booty’ was a backhanded compliment because, while she wants her butt to be appreciated, she also wants to be seen as more than just a sexualized body part. Anna also explained that men often ask her to show them her salsa moves, even going as far as asking her to teach them as well. She told me that this kind of request usually made her recoil and refuse, as she said above, she doesn’t want to “just be the cutie with the booty.”

Peaches put a historical lens on fetishization in her own life, explaining that being at parties requires her to be constantly worried if someone has a racial fetish or not.

I'm always worrying about if someone has a fetish or not, or if someone only wants to hook up with me because I'm Black. And again, I think it maybe even is a more intense feeling hooking up with someone especially if they're not Black because it's something about them owning a body, touching your body, taking advantage of your body. And especially if it's a white man, it's just something that really harkens back to slavery and like Black women being raped by these masters and like carrying their children, but being seen as like the scum of the Earth, but still the masters wanted to rape them.

Peaches recounted this analysis to me, explaining how intergenerational trauma and historical dynamics reemerge in interactions in the present moment. Of course, this doesn’t go without deeply emotional and psychological effects. Peaches went on to explain:

Like I don't know there must be some sort of like sexual desire there between white man and a black woman, but at the same time like thinking of those contexts and like just thinking about being used because of my body. Like I know my body belongs to me and it's like I'm so much more than my body as well. And I think like that's just such a scary thing to think of like someone literally like just taking advantage of you in that way. [...] It's a really like scary sentiment and yeah, it just doesn't feel good to even think about it.
Peaches’ quote exhibits how trying to navigate the winding roads of hookup culture while carrying this generational and historical trauma is extremely difficult. Further, she constantly has to negotiate the potential risk of being fetishized by people in this way. While other women’s concerns at a party may be “do I want to hookup with this person or not?”, Peaches’ concern is rooted much deeper and she is constantly second guessing whether or not she will experience a kind of racial-sexual violence that has preceded her for centuries.

Peaches was not the only person who cited slavery’s role and influence on affecting sexual dynamics between people in a hookup. Janelle mentioned slavery as well in her explanation for why men, particularly white men, treat her body in the way that they do.

I know that it's a common front like common thing that men don't know how to get women off. But I also think that like so much more of that is wrapped up in the fact that I am a Black woman and what it means to be a Black woman and the sexualization and exotification, and again, dehumanization of how my body is supposed to like give pleasure to other people especially white men, you know, given slavery.

Both Peaches’ and Janelle’s stories make obvious the complexity that slavery brings to the table— the power dynamics (both racial and gendered) and the stereotypes of hypersexuality and undesirability. This places Black women in a bind where they experience casual intimacy only as being objects that are exoticized and hypersexualized and when they are not objectified as an experience to check off one’s list, they are cast to the side and unrecognized.

Yellow Fever is a “racial fetish [with] a preference for Asian women (and men)” (Zheng 2016). In queer circles, a person with Yellow Fever may also be noted as a ‘rice queen’ or ‘rice king,’ which is a label used to demarcate queer and/or gay non-Asian men who are predominantly attracted to other Asian men. In hookup culture (as well as with dating), this kind of fetishism can often be depicted as “morally unobjectionable [because] it is merely an ‘aesthetic’ or ‘personal’ choice (Zheng 2016).” At Williams, yellow fever appears to be rampant
across campus, in addition to the other incidents of racialization for other women of color. All East Asian American interviewees spoke of yellow fever and an overwhelming majority had personal experiences of it themselves. The few who hadn’t experienced it firsthand, then they had friends who have experiences of being fetishized for being East Asian. Alex encapsulated this experience well, recounting what it was like for her freshman year when she was still looking to hookup with people:

Well, I think it's weird especially being an Asian woman, you know, because there’s yellow fever [...] I’ve always felt like kind of deeply suspicious at parties, you know, being like, 'is this person like just hooking up with me or just doing this because they just want to find an Asian woman to hook up with tonight?' And it feels super creepy. Sometimes where you're like, 'whoa, like this is really weird.' Like I guess you don't know in the moment, right? And then you realize afterwards. It's you and like your three Asian friends who hooked up with the same person and you're like, 'that's creepy.'

What was made evident through these interviews is that women of color who choose to engage in hookup culture are required to carry the extra burden of being reduced to a fetishized object while also actively cultivating the awareness that’s inherently required by being a woman in that space.

Hookup culture in its meaninglessness and temporariness is also assumed to be a post-racial market for momentary pleasure. This romantic regime denies that racial interactions come with emotionality. Hookup culture tolerates people to desire certain races but does not allow space for people to feel things about being racialized. If the intention for it is just for casual intimacy then all bodies are supposed to be able to fulfill that requirement. If hookups were truly meaningless, then what would race and ethnicity matter to people anyway? Therefore, the fact that race has meaning on women’s bodies and affects how they are evaluated as potential hookup partners further supports the argument that hooking up actually does carry meaning.

Do They Like Me or Do They Like…?
An underlying sentiment expressed throughout my interviews with women of color is not just the fear of being fetishized itself but also the fear that whoever shows interest in them is only interested because of their racial or ethnic presentation. The feeling of being fetishized is, in itself, unpleasant, but I have observed that women have a particular disdain for the experience because it implies that a person’s racial or ethnic identity is the most attractive part of them and not their personality, sexiness, intelligence, humor, etc. People want to be valued for who they are rather than what group they belong to. Alex summarized the concern that Asian women often face—she said: “I think that it’s scary just knowing that you’re, you know, like in a space where you're like, ‘wow, did this person like choose to like hook up with me because of that?’” The tone in Alex’s voice when she conjured this question seemed to replicate the sense of disappointment one would get if they thought that they might have been fetishized. Andrea eloquently expressed and elaborated on this idea, saying:

I just think like the way white men look at women of color is always going to be through an exoticizing, fetishizing lens just because, you know, white supremacy does that. It detaches people from, I don't know, people of color from being people. It's kind of just like they're this mystical, desirable being because of their otherness and not because of the fact that they're people. So the desirability, in that sense, I think cannot be detached from like a potential fetishizing relationship.

Andrea explained succinctly how this fetishizing lens inherently devalues women of color from being people in addition to the already objectifying script that hookup culture follows. She hit on the exact fear that so many women of color feel regarding hookups: that their greatest draw is not the things that make them human, but rather their being of color and their exoticness. In addition, women of color read as even more other and exotic in overwhelmingly white environments like the party spaces at Williams.

In addition, Ashley pointed out that women of color are also often quick to deem someone as having a fetish:
This idea of yellow fever is sometimes tossed around. It's always been a negative connotation, but I think it’s sometimes used incorrectly. So most of my friends are Asian American and we are all female and we see maybe a white male hetero dating someone or seeing someone who is Asian and we immediately target them as having yellow fever and I think that might be a little too sensitive or yeah, I think it's like too easy to assume.

This moment of judgment or labeling indicates the way that women of color are also quick to delegitimise not only their own personal experience but also the experiences of other women if the person in question is suspected to have yellow fever. Usually this reflects more on the person with a yellow fever diagnosis than the person who is perhaps evidence of the yellow fever, but often this labeling can have effects on both parties. At a school like Williams that is so small, word travels quickly and widely. It is quite easy for a student to garner a reputation as someone with Yellow Fever (or any racial fetish, for that matter) because of how much people talk. Therefore, if an Asian or Asian American woman is seen dating or hooking up with a man who people believe to have Yellow Fever, her peers will likely judge her negatively for choosing to be with that person. This judgment likely comes from a commonplace belief among Asian and Asian American women that Yellow Fever label as an extreme character flaw, rendering someone as undateable and undesirable to be with.

Yellow Fever, Jungle Fever— How about White Fever?

In light of the yellow fever notion at Williams, several people also expressed annoyance at the fact that yellow fever, jungle fever, and their likes aren’t matched with a comparable ‘white fever’ to designate those who are commonly only attracted to white people. This particular concern was raised by two Asian women who both happened to be in long-term relationships with white men. Whitney seemed frustrated and confused when she explained to me how she felt like it was unfair that even when women of color say they are only interested in white people, they are not diagnosed with any kind of fetish or social disease.
I think there are a lot of like nuances and [yellow fever] exists in like a lot of different ways. [...] Even if girls were like, okay I just like white guys or something like that and like as a person who is dating a white guy like I think about how people aren’t like ‘ooh, you have like [blah blah] fever.’

The lack of a ‘white fever’ indicates how this hegemonic idea of whiteness as attractive has been so normalized and internalized that being exclusively attracted to white people is not seen as unconventional but being exclusively attracted to people of a non-white racial identity is unusual to the point that it is pathologized and called a ‘fever.’

Alex echoed Whitney’s sentiment, suggesting that it’s an undue burden on women of color to be worried about the way that they are racialized and objectified.

[Yellow fever]’s like both kind of disappointing and also angers me, you know in a way where it's like [...] there's no white fever I guess I wouldn't be questioning that if I wasn’t Asian and if this wasn't some concept that, I don't know, people kind of invented for white men who like Asian woman, you know, and it just feels very icky.

Here, Alex expressed very clearly the injustice in her feeling the need to question herself and men’s desire toward her while white women never have to doubt themselves in that way.

Furthermore, this injustice is felt on top of how bad it feels to be the subject of someone’s fetish desire.

The white beauty standard is so ubiquitous and widely accepted that being attracted to only white people is seen as normal and goes unquestioned. Not being attracted to white people at all is an anomaly, but it is not uncommon for people to not be attracted to Black people, particularly Black women nor is it uncommon for people to express that outright. Margaret Hunter explored this racial sexual hierarchy through her concept of ‘the beauty queue,’ which is “a rank ordering of women from lightest to darkest where the lightest get the most perks and rewards, dates for example, and the darkest women get the least.” (Hunter 2000, 69). Hunter explained that “notions of beauty are so closely related to color that the terms ‘light-skinned’ and ‘pretty’ were nearly synonymous” (2000, 70). Therefore, it is no wonder that people are often
only attracted to white people because they are so close to what our society conceives of as beautiful. Even in families of color, “light skin was seen as a device for approval in families, as well as a near pre-requisite for the designation ‘beautiful’” (2000, 70). This idea of light skin being the prerequisite indicates how, in my cases, beauty cannot exist unless whiteness is also present. Hunter also illuminated that:

The lightest women get access to more resources because not only are they lighter-skinned and therefore racially privileged, but their light skin is interpreted in our culture as more beautiful and therefore they also are privileged as beautiful women.

Hunter makes it clear that racial privilege in this situation is separate from the privilege that women get for being beautiful; thus, while they are deeply intertwined they are also compounding on one another, placing women of color at an even more severe disadvantage when it comes to dating/marriage circuit and other sites of intimacy.

Turquoise told me a story about the beauty queue, without saying it in so many words. The story concerned a blind date dance her freshman year— the premise of the dance is that the Junior Advisors (JA) of a Mission entry would pair up with the JA’s of a Frosh Quad entry to set up their frosh with one another as each other’s dates to the dance. In this case, Turquoise’s JA hinted that someone her entry (and particularly her hallway) was specially requested by one of the boys in the other entry. With this secret knowledge, Turquoise’s friend and hallmate decided to make a list of people she thought might be the lucky, chosen girl. Turquoise recounted this event saying:

Immediately the people of color, my friends of color, were put down to the bottom of the list. Yeah, and of those, those who weren't the most sexually active were like put even further down. It's like if you're a person of color and you are also not putting it out, you're not desirable.

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8 A Junior Advisor or JA is the Williams College version of a college RA. JA’s typically serve as older mentors to first-year students as they transition to college life.
The list that Turquoise’s friend made is a real-life example of the way that the beauty queue plays in life situations. Seemingly innocuous, this list actually reveals the racism in hookup/dating culture as well as the undue weight that people put on sexiness as a measure of desirability. Turquoise’s friend’s placing of people of color at the bottom of her list implies that the link between race, sexiness, and sexual available are all linked though they might not be explicitly thought about. This logic and use of race and sexual history to predict who was chosen by the random boy in the other entry makes the values within the hookup culture script evident.

Furthermore, Hunter makes a special point to note that the white beauty standard women actually fosters resentment between women of color, which, as a result, allows for men to maintain their “status as full subjects and white women and men maintain their racial privilege by having their own phenotype defined as most beautiful” (Hunter 2000, 91). This preoccupation with whiteness and maleness that both heterosexual hookup culture and cultural beauty standards normalize can make it so that both white women and women of color are unable to see the ways that women are pitted against one another while vying for the attention of men. Meanwhile men, particularly white men, are able to maintain their autonomy and power in the structure as women are still subjugated in this hierarchy of desire.

Fear of Reinforcement and Burden of Representation

Due to the burden of representation, folks also fear fetishization because they want to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes to their racial/ethnic group as much as possible. A few of my participants told me they felt self-conscious or concerned about participating in hookup culture because they did not want to perpetuate sexualized images of people of their racial/ethnic identity. Ashley told me this affected her participation in hookup culture significantly, manifesting in her tendency to second-guess herself in a hookup situation.
A: If so back in freshman year if I, you know, made a move too quickly or I, you know, just kissed someone. It [might] be taken as oh, they're so easy or like it's easier to get an Asian woman. I just like always was aware of that. And so I never really knew [if I] was taking it too fast because of my color or was it okay?

G: Where do you think this stereotype comes from?

A: I think from just stereotypes— Madame Dragonfly. There are three like stereotyped women: either you're really docile, [...] there's also the mystical and I guess exotic one and then the other one [is] just evil one. So either way it's like for the consumption or like desire of others or for others.

As she outlines, Ashley took issue with the ways in which racialized sexual stereotypes caused her to be hyper-aware of her behaviors in hookup situations. Specifically, the stereotype of the “easy” or docile Asian woman seemed to make Ashley uncertain about her own actions and their implications. In her interview, she appeared to also draw a causal connection between the stereotype and her behavior, begging the question: was she acting in the way that she was because the “easy” Asian woman stereotype is true? This sexualized stereotype of Asian woman framed her actions in a way that caused her to not only be fearful that she was upholding it through her behaviors but also that her actions were motivated by it. My analysis of this is not that the promiscuous, docile Asian woman stereotype is true, but rather that the otherness that Asian women embody has been highlighted by Westerners to characterize Asian women as sexual objects instead of autonomous beings. However, because of the formation of this idea through art and media (i.e. as seen in Madame Butterfly), the idea has become normalized and accepted as true to the point where Asian American women like Ashley think that their actions are born out of the “fact” that Asian women are inherently hypersexual. This attribution to biology was communicated through her questioning whether her behaviors were “because of [her] color” or not. Further, because there is little media that shows Asian women as neither hypersexualized or desexualized (i.e. the nerdy Asian girl who does her math homework all the
time), there are few counter narratives that are able to combat or deconstruct this stereotype, further reinforcing the perception that it is true.

Similarly, Andrea talked about how sexual stereotypes of Latina women affect her engagement with hookup culture. The way that Andrea talked about this illuminated a different perspective on stereotypes and hookup culture— she explained that because of these stereotypes, she not only has a harder time engaging in hookup spaces but she also has just chosen not to engage all together.

I feel like women of color are always like hyper-sexualized anyways, so it's like why would I like try and add to that stereotype where it's like, oh like like the classic like media trope, which is like the spicy Latina, you know, like it makes me feel weird.

In her interview, she explained the number of reasons why she has chosen to step away from hookups, but this quote in particular illustrates an attitude of defeat rather than empowerment, which is the antithesis of the sexual liberation that hookup culture erroneously sells to women. Andrea expressed discomfort with the potential of upholding harmful, stereotypical media representations such as the ‘spicy Latina’ trope through her engagements with hookup culture. Though this may be evident, white women do not run into the same obstacles as women of color when it comes to racial sexual stereotypes, as there are none that they must compare themselves against and/or use as metrics for their own sexual behavior.

**Colorism and Comparison**

Many of the women I talked to were keenly aware of how the color of their skin fundamentally dictated how they could navigate hookup culture spaces, both regarding men but also regarding each other. Though more often than not, these comparisons were made between women of color and white women, occasionally they were also mentioned in times when women of color explained their standing with hookup culture in regards to their other friends who are
women of color. Throughout her interview, Anna kept referring to her light skin as something that served her well in trying to navigate party and hookup spaces.

I've had it easy because at least I know [...] if I really wanted to hook up with somebody then I could, that's just the type of privilege I've been afforded based on the way that I look and the features that I have. But it's even more infuriating to know that I have beautiful friends like Black and other Latina women who don't have as much proximity to this white standard of beauty and so for them it's even more difficult for men approach them and tell them things like ‘oh like you're beautiful, you're attractive’ and so like that for me is even more frustrating seeing how hard it can be for some of my friends at Williams. In some ways I'm grateful because I know this is not something that I've had to struggle with but I also know that because of who I am and somehow I continue to feed into this group of lighter skinned women.

Anna is able to recognize that her comfort with hookup culture is largely due to her lighter skin tone. Many other light-skinned people also reported similar sentiments to Anna, in which they acknowledged that their ability to engage with hookup culture is because of their distance or proximity to whiteness.

Peaches, a woman who is much darker skinned than Anna, told the opposite side of this story, in which she, a Black woman, had suffered at the hand of her lighter-skinned friends ditching her at parties because they were swept up by men, while Peaches would be left alone at the end of the night. She not only talked about how they’re able to have sex on the weekends, but also how these things tend to lead to longer term, more relationship-like experiences for them. All of this seems inaccessible to Peaches in comparison.

So the friends I pregame with are all Latina and they're light Latinas or a couple of them are and, you know, they probably identify as white Latinas. The ones I know, they always have a guy they're hooking up with on the weekends. It could be a white guy, could be a Black guy, but they always have some sort of consistent dick. Whenever I go out with them to Hoxsey, they'll leave with a guy or they'll leave for the booty call. [...] Whenever I go out to Hoxsey, I don't go for male attention because I don't get it. I don't get guys asking me to dance or [...] the only guys who will ever dance with me are other Black guys, which is fine. But they get all these white guys and Black guys and it's like for me, if I'm only attracted to Black men and the Black ones are also attracted to light-skinned Latina girls. It's like, where's my niche? Who's going to even ask me out? You know, who's going to even like think I'm pretty?
Peaches expressed frustration and also defeat, saying that while for many the draw to Hoxsey is the potential for sex or intimacy, she has had to adjust her expectations to not expect those things for herself. Further, Peaches highlighted the competitive aspect of hookup culture, which forces women to think of other women (of color) as competitors for a scarce resource: male attention. Competition among women of color ultimately fractures relationships between women of color, rupturing potentials for solidarity and community building in search of being affirmed by hegemony. As a result, the white heteropatriarchy is upheld by this kind of competition. In Peaches’ case, she felt that she could not even compete for Black men, who would be the most likely to be interested in her due to the racial-sexual hierarchy, because they were pining after women with lighter skin than hers.

Peaches went on to talk about the way colorism is justified through racist ways of thinking that operate under the guise of normalized sexual “types.” Her experience seemed to lead her to believe that light-skinned Latinas are more exotic and less threatening to men because of their proximity to whiteness, which then manifests in them having more hookups than her.

I remember talking about it with my other friend who's also black and darker-skinned like me. And we're talking about how it's not an even battle with women of color because if you are lighter, it's almost like you're just exotic enough, but you're not too black or not too ethnic for a guy to be intimidated or embarrassed to be with you. But it's like we find that our light skin friends or our lighter skin Latina friend bags a lot of guys because they're the perfect balance between exotic or not white and not black though. And that I don't know how much better that is about how I'm treated but it does sometimes make you feel too black or too... Like you really feel your skin color and you really feel like how you look and all your features and it's a really weird experience.

On the other end of things, Peaches’ experience appears to confirm Anna’s assumption that being light-skinned, and particularly being a light-skinned Latina, increases one’s chance to find someone to hook up with that night. She attributes this increased chance to being just exotic enough, but not too much and not too black— the exoticness of a woman of color increases their sex appeal because of patterns of hypersexualization, but too much difference or distance from
whiteness elicits responses of intimidation or embarrassment from people. In response to this, Peaches said that she feels her skin color more palpably in those spaces because they cause her to compare herself to other women who are getting affirmation from others.

My participants recognized ways in which they could manipulate their appearance so that they could be noticed more by men in hookup spaces, a practice that extends beyond just the ritual of getting ready and looking nice but involves presentation of one’s race and skin color. For example, Charlotte, a light-skinned biracial (African American Caribbean and white) woman, told me about how she realized that straightening her hair allowed her to be more noticeable at parties.

Hair was always in a really annoying things because I'd always want to straighten it before going out which would add like an extra hour to like my going-out routine and it would always get really frizzy by the end of the night I was always like, 'ugh why did I do this’ why did you want to straighten your hair before going out? Because I always have more attention from guys when it was straighter, which is like really fucked up. Yay white beauty norms, we love it. But it's also hard at Williams because like I feel like the girls that were most wanted were the skinny blonde girls. It was like a certain type of person.

Though one could consider Charlotte’s decision to straighten her hair as a personal decision, this is very much a commentary on colorism. Black hair has been demonized culturally by racist beauty practices that dictate the way women view themselves (Mercer 1992). Hair, Mercer claimed, is just as visible as skin color and is also sometimes a more accurate signifier of racial difference than skin color. Therefore, “if racism is conceived as an ideological code in which biological attributes are invested with societal values and meanings, then it is because our hair is perceived within this framework that is burdened with a range of negative connotations” (Mercer 1992, 113). Mercer means that Black hair exists within a racist framework and its Black characteristics makes it ‘ugly’ or ‘inferior.’
Mercer goes further to say that “distinctions of aesthetic value, ‘beautiful/ugly,’ have always been central to the way racism divides the world into binary oppositions in its adjudication of human worth” (1992, 113). This is seen distinctly through hookup culture and the ways that women are judged and adjudicated by people (specifically men) depending on their appearance and therefore their proximity to whiteness and Western features. Charlotte’s practice of straightening her hair before she goes out shows the ways in which women of color feel the need to look ‘whiter’ than they are so that they are judged in hookup spaces more favorably to risk rejection and negative feelings that come when judgments deem them unworthy of attention. It seems that the more proximal to whiteness a person is, the better their odds of success on the hookup circuit. Charlotte’s hair straightening is successful for her as a biracial woman because she is light-skinned to begin with; however, if a darker-skinned Black woman straightened her hair, it unlikely that this choice in personal aesthetics will work with similar success merely because of how far away from whiteness she is to begin with. Furthermore, some Black women cannot even engage in temporary practices that may make them more ‘pleasing’ by the standards of hookup culture because of the hairstyle they currently have.

**Race and Access**

In a majority of the interviews I performed with women of color, they characterized hookup culture as laborious and effortful. As a woman of color myself, I have often marveled at the ease with which conventionally attractive white women seem to be able to navigate these spaces, having societal standards of beauty and white privilege to their advantage (as well as class privilege, often). In contrast, my friends and I have conversed about the qualms and doubts that come with being a woman of color in party spaces. This contrast is evidenced by the white
women that I interviewed as a comparison group. When I asked Lily, a white straight woman on
the volleyball team, how much effort she put into hookup culture, she responded:

I don't usually actually look for someone new. I think if I run into someone I know or if I
see someone that I hooked up with and they're also engaging in conversation or want to
hang out I hook up with them. But it's not like I'm actively searching. I think it's more
like I've gotten approached more than active searching.

To her, hookup culture has been characterized by men approaching her instead of vice versa—
she explained that she doesn’t find herself actively searching for men to hookup with. Violet,
another white straight woman who is on the swim team, explained a slightly more complicated
situation. She reported that, in times when she was mourning relationships and wanted someone
to take her mind off her sadness, she wished there were people who were pursuing her. However,
she then explained:

And once I'm happy again or over that person. It always feels like people flock to hook
up with me, if that makes sense. And I'm like, 'I don't want to date any of you’ but my
freshman spring when I had finally just gotten over freshman fall boy, there's a list on my
friend's phone of eight people who were trying to hook up with me at the time.

Violet told me she believed in the common saying that “it's always there when you're not looking
for it,” echoing the sense of effortlessness that Lily also seemed to express about finding people
to hookup with and who also want to hookup with her.

I also found that Bridget’s answer to the same question was similar, one characterized by
a kind of thoughtlessness that women of color trying to navigate the same script don’t share.

I don't know if I would describe [it] really as like putting in conscientious effort-- I think
it's just a thing that I tend towards, like I enjoy being flirty with people. So like it
doesn't— I think less conscientiously about it in terms of effort, maybe?

For Bridget, who is a conventionally attractive, tall white woman, it sounds like her natural state
of being has given her hookup opportunities— flirting with people doesn’t take effort and comes
naturally to her.
These responses are a stark contrast to how women of color talked about effort in hookups. For example, Isabelle, a biracial queer woman, and Nani, a Nicaraguan American queer woman, both expressed that they had no idea how hookups happened— the script seemed to be unclear to them. Isabelle said:

I'm still kind of baffled by it...I used to think of it as like a confidence thing or like a goal that so if you went into a party and knew that you wanted to do this and knew you wanted to leave with someone like hook up with someone there then that's all it took...I think it's become a lot more complicated in my mind since I've gotten older and like thought more about the ways that culture is racialized or gender and realizing that like whatever that confidence means is not just wanting it and therefore making it happen.

Evidently, they see that hooking up as something to be learned and then enacted, not just a thing that coincidentally happened to them. Or rather, they had not had experiences similar to Lily, Violet, and Bridget that would have allowed them to believe that hookup culture did not take effort. However, Anna, a light-skinned Afrolatina woman who identifies as straight says that for her, a “majority of the time guys will have approached me or like will have asked me for my number and then like through texting and it's like oh then things just flow.” Anna described to me that she, at first, primarily went to parties hosted by affinity groups and then eventually moved on to Hoxsey Street parties where there were more white athletes and the parties resembled the kind of frat parties that one might see in the movies.

**Party and Hookup Spaces**

The whiteness of the party spaces on campus, in and of itself, seems to prevent women of color from feeling like they can comfortably access hookups or casual intimacy circuits on campus. The parties where hegemonic hookup culture lives are often hosted by white, wealthy athletes who live on Hoxsey Street and foster the closest thing to Greek Life on this campus. Many of my participants expressed extreme discomfort in these spaces, feeling as though they
cannot ever belong in this space let alone be affirmed by it. Peaches explained her experience to me by recounting a particular day when she went out to a darty⁹:

You feel very Black when you're in a very white space like that. You just feel very, very Black [...] people are looking at you and I can tell my body is different than everyone else's there and I wore a tight dress that day. So, you know, it was I wasn't ashamed but people will come out and I was like, 'oh, I wish I could dance like you' and you're very hyper aware of especially in the daytime.

This experience of being a Black woman amidst a sea of white people shows how hypervigilant women of color, but especially Black women, have to be in these spaces. Not only can women of color not enjoy their time in these spaces because of the way that they are treated, but being on guard inherently takes away the aspects of parties that are supposed to be fun or enjoyable. Rose reported on these spaces in similar terms, saying:

I certainly felt othered in certain spaces. Some parties were worse than others. Like if you ever went to a lacrosse party or a tennis party or anything like that -- it was just the whitest room ever-- and I would leave spaces where I was like, 'this is where it felt like strictly white athlete spaces.'

In many ways, these spaces are forbidding to those who don’t fit the mold and continue to be forbidding because students of color end up perpetually choosing not to engage because it continues to feel as though the space is not welcome to them. Thus, while hookup culture seems to exclude women of color in terms of desirability and interpersonal connections, the spaces exist in a way that also literally prevent women of color from feeling like they belong there, adding yet another barrier to hookup culture for women of color. Often times this also manifests in self-selecting out of that space, many people of color choose not to party on Hoxsey because the music is bad and because the people are not their community. Therefore, if a woman of color

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⁹ A “darty” is a day party. These often take place outside in broad daylight at an off-campus house. At Williams, they are often hosted at Meadow, a Hoxsey Street house, or Poker Flats. The activities of the day include drinking, talking to people, and occasionally dancing. Because darties are limited by weather, people have coined the term “darty season,” which usually refers to the time during the spring semester in which one can actually spend time drinking outside and enjoy it.
wished to enter these spaces that are the site of hookup culture itself there seems to be a risk involved, as they not only have to place themselves in a space where they visibly stick out, but also risk engaging with (or not engaging with) people who may make them feel lesser than and devalued.

The Mythology of Being “Sexually Liberated”

For some women of color, access seems to be the first problem to hooking up— women of color either don’t feel welcome in the spaces on campus where hookup culture usually happens and/or women of color lack the knowledge or experience to ‘successfully’ engage with hookup culture. Granted, not having experience in this realm creates a positive feedback loop, where a lack in experience (and therefore, confidence) then leads to the inability to acquire experience. For white women, it seems as though the barriers to entry into hookup culture were just much lower, in fact, so low that they hardly noticed or registered them as barriers.

Throughout her interview, Lily communicated a conflicted view of hookup culture. Following the airing of some doubts about hookup culture, Lily said, “I think there are like pluses like being sexually liberated. It’s a good part of hookup culture, but I think it can also be misused in a way...a kind of a ‘taken advantage’ way.” Here, Lily talked about ‘sexual liberation’ as a product of hookup culture for her.

However, for many women of color, hookup culture represents something far from ‘sexual liberation.’ Andrea characterized this phenomenon saying:

I think part of it can be empowering I guess like owning your sexuality and like being open and like, you know sexual liberation, but I don't think that's a thing that women of color are able to do because you are so sexualized in the media and like in the way people talk about like brown and black bodies specifically.

Rather, hookup culture and the spaces affiliated with it often represent a place of racial and sexual trauma, pain, and feelings of unworthiness because of the way that these women have
been continually ignored and unrecognized at parties by men, both white and of color. As Andrea says, sexual liberation is not possible here for women of color because they are often not the ones leaving to have sex but also because it is just yet another site at which they can experience the negative repercussions of their racialization, subordination, and objectification. The lack of liberation present is evident in the way women of color are constantly fearful of being fetishized, of being objectified because of their racial or ethnic identities. Furthermore, if the current neoliberal society defines liberation as having the option to choose, then women of color do not even experience sexual liberation in hookup culture given that limited definition because they do not have the ability to choose within a hookup space.

The exclusionary nature of hookup culture makes its narrative of “sexual liberation” inherently false. As women of color are unable to participate in hookup culture, it is also difficult for queer people to participate in hegemonic hookup culture by nature of the hyperheterosexuality that rules those spaces. Not only is hookup culture more difficult to navigate if you are a person of color, but it is also hard to maneuver depending on one’s sexual orientation. True sexual liberation would be liberatory for all people, not just those who fit the stereotypical white, wealthy, straight, cisgender college student for whom the College was crafted.

**Conclusion**

The current iteration of hookup culture is not for everyone. Despite the narrative that hookup culture brings sexual liberation for all those who choose to participate in it, hookup culture fails to deliver liberation let alone healthy, pleasurable physical intimacy for the people who choose to engage. For those who don’t, hookup culture still dictates how people perceive and understand intimacy. Therefore, it is important to interrogate what hookup culture says about
race and how people of color, particularly women of color, are treated within this script. Though women across the board seem to have complaints and grievances against hookup culture, it comes as no surprise that women of color most frequently see the ugly underbelly of a culture that claims to be freeing to women. In party spaces and in the bedroom, women of color regularly run into instances of racism, sexism, and colorism if they are even able to enter such spaces in the first place. They are being approached too much or not at all, being told to speak in one’s native tongue, or having one’s body be touched in ways that carry historical resonances all the way back to slavery. These events are injustices that women of color face on college campuses in some of the most personal arenas of their lives. Further, these events fundamentally shape how women of color perceive their self-worth, desirability, and sexuality yet are hardly ever talked about.

Amidst all of this pain of sexualization, racialization, and feeling of inferiority, Peaches told me about a different kind of liberation that she experienced, in which she feels that her presence in hookup spaces, despite being oppressive and exclusive, is her own form of resistance.

But sometimes that's kind of what's liberating because it's like ‘yeah, I am who I am,’ and I'm in a group of all these people that don't look like me and are all staring at me and you know what? I'm still going to own it and look good. But like that's extra motivation for me to like look good before I go to these things and to like feel good before so that I can kind of deal with that like microscope on me.

She characterizes her confidence in her Blackness and in her body when she enters white spaces as ‘liberating.’ While a limited form of liberation, one that is necessitated because of the oppressive conditions in which students of color are forced to carve a space for themselves, perhaps there are small moments of redemption, small instances that empower women of color to keep fighting.
Ultimately, however, women of color should not be forced to create these small pockets of liberation (crafted out of necessity and even survival) for themselves. Peaches’ liberatory moments, while good for her, will likely not work for everyone and women of color will continue to feel excluded from the predominant script of intimacy. To make permanent, profound change in the current romantic regime at Williams, there should be a fundamental restructuring of social space and scripts so that there are more relationalities and scripts for students to engage with. Hookup culture’s valuation rests in the body and this, given our racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, capitalist culture, inherently writes harmful and even violent practices into how students understand intimacy and relationships. Though a large transformation needs to occur to fix the current romantic regime, creating more spaces for people to connect meaningfully and authentically would be an effective first step toward establishing healthier relationalities on campus and would also likely lead to a better campus culture as a whole.
CONCLUSION

What would happen if the goal of parties was to make new friends? Or have fun in whatever way you wish to enjoy yourself? Or to dance like a maniac and sweat through your clothes and not care who sees you?

To truly understand relationality and intimacy in the early 21st century college context, it is imperative that we examine the ways in which structures such as capitalism and racism have been woven into relationship norms and ways of being. Ultimately, capitalism impacts relationships more than people would suspect (or would like), often rendering interactions as transactional or facilitating the objectification of bodies in intimate contexts. In the realm of romance and sex, race is reduced to the categories of “attracted to” or “not attracted to,” with the racialization of desire as biological instead of socially constructed. Racism rests within desire and is the backbone of the framework that dictates how people of color are treated in regards to desire. People are able to justify their aversion to dating or having sex with people of color by saying they are “simply not attracted” to them or “they’re just not my type.” This creation of a “type” is a result of the rationalization of romance under the influence of capitalism, it’s the writing of a checklist of qualities that will lead to the right partner and, by most, is seen as a legitimate enough of a reason to discount entire ethnic and racial groups when it comes to desire. Historically, women of color have been marginalized by being rendered as less desirable, less beautiful, and less worthy— this phenomenon continues to appear in the current romantic regime as well.

The explanation of desire as purely biological leads to normalization and attraction is resultantly viewed as a whim or an intuition caused purely by some kind of biological process. This ultimately legitimizes the racial sexual hierarchy. Therefore, “just not being into *insert race here* people” is often seen as a valid reason for why one may not find another person
attractive, as attraction is supposedly produced by the subconscious and is not something that can
be intentionally conjured in a person. Biology has reinforced racism for the sake of capitalism for
centuries, whether it is the depiction of Black people as inferior in science (and thus enslavable)
or the essentialization of Native peoples to “noble savages” as a way to justify the colonization
of their lands for resources. This unsurprisingly manifests in hookup culture, when the market-
dictated rationalization of desire depicts women of color as lesser objects and products in the
erotic marketplace or as temporarily more “valuable” because of their exotic flavor. The “oh
they’re just not into *insert race* people” then becomes internalized and normalized for women
of color when thinking about folks they are trying to pursue. This internalization functions as a
protection mechanism and as a way to set reasonable expectations for themselves because that is
simply what hookup culture has told them to do. Consequently, this internalization has
ramifications on the emotional lives of women of color, as exemplified throughout the numerous
testimonies in this thesis.

When a structure that is systematized to devalue women of color also has a massive
impact on the social life of one’s community, it comes as no surprise that hookup culture has a
profound effect on how these women feel in their social environments and how they feel about
themselves. Women of color are frequently excluded from the criteria of what a desirable sexual
or romantic partner looks like. As made evident through my research, there is an immense toll on
the psyches of women of color in a culture that puts an undue value on love, sex, and
heterosexuality in general. Women’s worth in society is still evaluated by their ability to exude
sexiness; thus, their performance in the hookup market and the erotic marketplace at large not
only indicates how desirable they are but also their worth in society and to themselves. These
ideas are internalized, reinforced, replicated, and recreated. And even if they are not internalized,
there are few alternative options that exist outside of hookup culture. Ultimately, this script affects the bonds between women of color, both potentially making them stronger but also breaking down possible sites of care, solidarity, resistance, and healing.

The norm to not care and to not feel becomes increasingly difficult to follow when the cards dealt do not make things easy. How is one supposed to deny feeling or meaning when societal norms are simultaneously saying that this structure determines one’s self-worth? Furthermore, how is one supposed to remain detached from feeling when the structure at hand is built to exclude entire groups of people? This paradoxical framework makes it impossible for those who do not fall on the favorable side of the system to follow the feeling rules; therefore, this makes it disproportionately difficult for women of color and people who are marginalized by the rules of hookup culture to participate. People continually divorce themselves from their emotions and embodied knowledge as a means to engage with hookup culture. Meanwhile, they are also only valuing people based on how well they can be transformed into sexual objects. While hookup culture is far from an ideal structure for women across the board, women of color bear multiple, compounding burdens— a reality that is true for women of color in nearly every aspect of their lives. Women of color not only have to bear the burden of misogyny in party spaces, but also have to put up with exclusion from white social spaces, the reconcile feeling both undesirable and too desirable for the wrong reasons, the emotion work dictated by feeling rules that simply do not make sense— the list continues and compounds.

For many women of color (and people of color in general), Williams College can be a very difficult environment to feel a sense of belonging and validation. This is by no means specific to Williams, but is rather the result of elite institutions of higher education being born of a legacy of whiteness, colonialism (for some, even slavery), and sexism. If colleges and
universities across the nation wish to herald their diversity stats, then it is imperative that they spend time understanding what needs to be restructured in order to foster a community that is truly inclusive and supportive of folks who do not look like the people for whom the institution was initially built for. Though hookup culture is arguably beyond the control of the College, it should not neglect the ways in which hookup culture impacts the emotional life of the student body and the ways that campus culture impacts relationality at Williams. A possible solution could look like making institutional changes to physical space and access to those spaces; this would likely foster more opportunities to create meaningful relationships.

As a student at Williams, I can see many ways in which campus culture intersects with hookup culture— the denial of emotion and compartmentalization that a student must practice in order to be productive mimics the emotionality seen in hookup culture, in which people must mask or change their feelings to be effective participants. If students are incentivized to deny their embodied experience and feelings in their academic lives as well as their social lives, they are also being encouraged to deny their emotions from all angles. Where, then, are they allowed to feel? Is there ever a proper place for students in these environments to feel? Perhaps the first question to ask is whether students are able to feel at all.

In my four years at college, I have personally experienced students’ inability to allow themselves to feel. The student body’s fear of emotion can be seen in drinking culture and ritualistic binge-drinking on the weekends to “release stress,” structures that dictate pieces of students’ lives. This fear also emerges in smaller instances that take on the form of utterances like “I can’t cry right now because I have a paper due in two hours” or a student lifting her head from her reading to release one single sob, and then methodically returning back to her work. These are not only things that I have seen my peers do in multiple different iterations, but are
similar behaviors to those that I have exhibited myself. Students are afraid of experiencing their emotions because of how they think their feelings may negatively affect their next exam, which may also derail their path to a “good,” stable career, financial stability, wealth accumulation, or however they may define success. The rigidity in emotion that is necessitated by a strict orientation toward success has made students shy away from the vulnerability and relational dependence that are required for the establishment of deep relationships. Furthermore, the regular practice of invulnerability also makes it difficult for people to both see and feel seen. It has become clear throughout the process of this project that people want to be recognized and appreciated in their romantic lives (and their lives in general). If people are not open to the vulnerability that is necessary to know and be known, then we will never achieve the kind of relationality that actually makes space for recognition.

People strive for indifference in hookup culture because they are afraid of the consequences that their emotions may bring, but this is not because they do not have those emotions. What would it look like to operate within a romantic regime that prioritized acknowledgment of a sexual partner’s humanity instead of the selfish objectification of their body? I argue that a relationality that embraced the embodiment of feeling, attraction, love, and desire (and its consequent messiness) would create healthier dynamics in one’s relationships. It is not casual sex or the practice of physical intimacy outside of a committed relationship that inherently makes hookup culture a negative experience for many people (as some may believe), it is rather the ways in which unfeeling, non-emotional capitalist market principles have seized control of intimacy that have made casual intimacy toxic. Society’s view on hookup culture as sexual liberation seems to be derived from the extraction of sex from the context of committed relationships, facilitated by a divorcing of embodied experience, feelings, and sex. It seems that
in attempts to completely rid sex of any dependency on commitment, people swung so far in the opposite direction that they avoided anything that might resemble a relationship, such as communication or human decency. To establish a culture of healthy casual sex, it is imperative to understand that practices of care should not be exclusive to romantic, committed relationships and to use that logic to re-infuse practices of care into casual intimacy as a way to make people actually feel recognized instead of used after spending a night with someone. The establishment of a healthier romantic regime can start as simply as the practice of actions that acknowledge the other person’s humanity, which could look like saying “hi” to last night’s sexual partner at brunch the next morning or normalizing mutual, consensual pleasure in a hookup. Furthermore, allowing for vulnerability and establishing a norm for clear communication between two parties would not only likely make people feel better in their hookups, but would also shift hookup culture away from rape culture. However, given all this, the large oppressive systems that poison relationality, neoliberalism, capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, are all still in place and will continue to affect the way that people navigate relationships until they are dismantled. It is possible to find redeeming moments and radical, vulnerable connections within the romantic regime that currently exists. But fundamentally, to live out a sexual and romantic culture that equally values everyone in their identities, we must unravel structures that have continually pushed people into the margins and work toward building ways of intimacy that allow for people to be seen in the way that they so deeply desire.


Hunter, Margaret Lily. The Lighter the Berry?: Race, Color, and Gender in the Lives of African American and Mexican American Women. 1999.


Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

1. First, what are your preferred pronouns and how do you identify racially or ethnically?
   a. If you are comfortable, how would you define your sexual orientation?
   b. Also, what year will you or did you graduate from Williams?
2. How would you describe the social spaces that you inhabit? What is your preferred way of socializing?
3. Would you say there is such a thing at Williams as hookup culture? Why do you say this?
   a. What is your idea of hookup culture? How does it operate (or not operate) in your life?
   b. In what ways have you/or have you not declined to participate in it?
   c. How are the relationship and hookup conventions at Williams differ from other schools? How do you know? Please give specific examples.
4. If you had to define hookup culture, how would you define it?
5. Why do you choose to engage with hookup culture in the way that you do?
   a. If you do engage with hookup culture:
      i. How much time would you say it takes up in your life?
      ii. How have hookups arisen for you, typically?
      iii. Do you feel pressured to engage with hookup culture?
      iv. If you go to parties, are there certain behaviors that you perform in preparation? Can you walk me through a typical night out?
   b. If you don’t engage with hookup culture:
      i. How do you think hookups arise?
      ii. Do you feel pressured to engage at all?
6. How do you communicate boundaries and defining a hookup?
   a. Who decides whether a given relationship can evolve from a hookup into something larger? Has this ever happened to you or someone you know? How exactly was the changing nature of the relationship negotiated? Is such a thing generally a desirable thing, and why/why not?
7. How do you prefer to engage with your love life at this stage of life? (i.e. do you prefer dating or casual hookups?)
8. What are your thoughts about hookup culture?
9. What are some spaces on campus that you associate with hookup culture and why?
10. Do you enjoy going out? What are your thoughts and feelings about it?
11. In general, how do you feel like your particular identities as a woman of color influence the way you operate at Williams? Either academically or socially?
12. Does your identity as a woman of color affect how you engage with hookup culture or party culture in general— if so, why?
   a. If you attend parties, are there any instances where you have felt particularly gendered or racialized or both?
   b. If you engage with hookup culture, are there any instances where you have felt particularly gendered or racialized or both? Do you have any examples of this?
   c. If you have friends who are POC and engage with hookup culture, how do they talk about it?
13. Lastly, do you have any people in the area who might be interested in being interviewed for my project?
14. So that’s all I have for you—do you have any questions for me?
Appendix B

List of Informants:

1. Peaches, Black American, Class of 2020
2. Isabel, Mixed race, queer, Class of 2019
3. Alex, Chinese American, straight, Class of 2019
4. Ella, Chinese American, queer, Class of 2021
5. Whitney, Asian American, straight, Class of 2016
6. Andrea, Non-white Latinx mixed race, queer, Class of 2019
7. Ann, Black American, straight, Class of 2017
8. Ashley, Chinese American, straight, Class of 2019,
9. Turquoise, Sri Lankan American, straight, Class of 2014
10. Tina, Han Chinese American, queer, Class of 2019
11. Grace, Korean American, queer, Class of 2017
12. Anna, Black/Afrolatina from the Dominican Republic, straight, Class of 2019
13. Rae, Colombian American, straight, Class of 2016
14. Charlotte, Biracial (African American Carribean and white), straight, Class of 2017
15. Janelle, Biracial (identifies as Black), pansexual, Class of 2018
16. Veronica, Black, queer, Class of 2017
17. Nani, Latina/Nicaraguan American, queer, Class of 2019
18. Rose, Mixed race (Black, white, Indigenous Cherokee), Class of 2014
19. Bridget, white, straight, Class of 2019
20. Lily, white, straight, Class of 2021
21. Violet, white, straight, Class of 2020