Encouraging Providence:

Uncertainty, Wellbeing, and the Making of New American Futures in the Home

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Abstract

THIS THESIS CONSIDERS how households in Providence, Rhode Island in the United States negotiate uncertainty and sustain wellbeing in their everyday lives. Drawing on twelve months of participant observation and interviews in eighteen middle class households in recent states of transition, the thesis introduces the concept of 'everyday uncertainty,' which encapsulates embodied senses of not knowing and conditions with unknown outcomes. Everyday uncertainty emerges as relational and productive, mediated through social, material, and individual means, and as entangled in the desire to cultivate wellbeing or the good life. Adapting an everyday material culture approach to the home, the ethnography attends to material culture and everyday practice, participant narratives, the atmosphere of space, and the home as a part of the nation and city. For the middle class homes described, ontological security, aspiration, improvisation and creativity, and the material environment of the city emerge as core facets of everyday uncertainty and the making of the good life. I draw their experiences together to argue that the 'frontier' of new American futures can be found in the home. This study of 'everyday uncertainty' sheds light on what people have to negotiate in conditions that are not particularly precarious or insecure. The ordinariness of everyday domestic lives helps begin to untangle the nuances between innate human improvisation and the neoliberal expectation of individual adaptability, particularly in the United States context.

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All photographs taken by Tess Bird during fieldwork and reprinted with permission from participants.

A Note on Text

Italicised quotations signal paraphrasing based on my recollection (often written during field notes). Quotation marks or indented block quotes signify language taken from interview transcripts; however, interview transcripts are edited to remove 'ums,' 'ers,' and repetitive language to assist in ease of reading.

Chapter One - Introduction and Methodology

THESIS INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE: THE ENTANGLEMENT OF EVERYDAY UNCERTAINTY AND WELLBEING IN THE HOME

OVER THE COURSE of the year, a household might encounter numerous micro-disasters—arguments with loved ones, burnt dinner, and spilled food. There is also the possibility of less ubiquitous disturbances, the types of ordeals that humans might expect but for which we are never prepared: the death of a grandparent, the apparent loss of a friendship, a non-fatal car accident, surgery, illness, divorce, losing a home, or the sudden confrontation of an unattainable future. In tandem to these micro-disasters and everyday traumas are the unexpected moments of joy—a phone call from a dear friend, a delicious meal shared with a partner, a really good workout—and positive life changes that spark reinvention: marriage, a new baby, a new job or home. Whether positive or negative, these events can challenge the continuity of daily routine and require response.

These are the type of events that I followed in 18 households of diverse types (single adults, shared housing, childless couples, and families at different life stages) in the Northeastern United States (US) from April 2015 to April 2016. These households all self-identify as middle class and are located in and around the coastal city of Providence, part of the greater Boston commuting area and the capital of Rhode Island, one of the smallest and

most densely populated states in the US.[1] Drawing on medical and material anthropology, my fieldwork explored health and wellbeing in relation to the everyday material culture of the home. During fieldwork, I found that nearly all the homes had one thing in common: each one was confronting, managing, or recovering from a fairly major transition, including moving, relationship or job changes, births, illness, and family death. Transition is in many ways a common facet of urban mobile societies, where people and things are often in motion (Augé 1995; Crang 2002). Transitions in the home disrupt everyday routine, sparking a renegotiation of the self and social relations (Garvey 2001; Reimer and Leslie 2004). People confront their emotional and embodied responses to change as well as the potential new futures and alternative pasts that change provokes (Mattingly 2014b). A transition can be as small as moving furniture (Garvey 2001) or as large as divorce (Valentine 1999). The commonality of such experiences raises a point of enquiry for anthropological research on health and wellbeing in the home. In attending to health and wellbeing we must consider what is possible in the everyday, accounting for the unexpected nature of disturbances, possible futures and notions of hope, and entanglements with the material and social world.

In attending to the everydayness of uncertainty, this thesis explores how households negotiate both mutable circumstances and affective experiences of the unknown, negotiations that are deeply embedded in the making of the good life (Robbins 2013; Mattingly 2014b). In inhabiting states of change and possibility, people draw upon and reinvent habits of adaptability and improvisation (Ingold and Hallam 2007). Uncertainty can thus be both creative and productive and is entangled in past experiences and future

[1] The title, *Encouraging Providence*, plays on traditional meanings of the word *providence,* evoking the protective care of God or nature as a spiritual power, luck or opportunity, and the state of quality of being provident (Merriam-Webster). The City of Providence, where this research took place, was named for 'God's merciful Providence' by a religious exile of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636.

possibility (Cooper and Pratten 2015). While questions of 'home' and home making in conditions of precarity have been approached in studies of forced migration (Brun and Fábos 2015) and other unpredictable circumstances, such as homelessness (Brickell 2016), considering uncertainty in conditions that are not particularly precarious offers insight into what situations people have to negotiate even when their circumstances are relatively secure.

The home is a point of access to the everyday and a space of intimate negotiation. In her study of the Japanese house, Inge Daniels (2010) views the home 'a physical environment where "shared human realities" are most profoundly experienced' (192) and where anthropologists can explore the 'in-between: the domestic frictions, the messiness of things, but also the gaps between the ideal and the ordinary' (195). While the home can be a space of 'homeyness' (McCracken 1989) and safety, it can just as easily become 'unhomely,' particularly as inhabitants confront life-altering events (Varley 2008; Brickell 2016). Exploring the domestic frictions at play can offer insight into how people negotiate uncertainty and wellbeing amongst themselves, one another, and the material environment. This involves paying attention to the 'ordinary habits and routinized aspects of everyday life' and 'back-stage' practices of the home which are both 'pervasive and elusive' (Shove, 2003:1-2) as well as unexpected disruptions and 'domestic frictions' (Daniels 2010) highlighted in the beginning of this section.

This thesis argues that uncertainty is negotiated between the self, others, and the material world in which we exist, and that the perceived quality and strength of these three components of everyday life are vital to sustaining wellbeing overtime. I draw attention to how 'everyday uncertainty' emerges and to how it is entangled in participant wellbeing. I draw the ethnography together to make a larger observation about the making of new

American futures in the home.

I begin with my methodology, to show how I came to the data presented and the thesis argument. This includes information on positionality as a researcher in my home region and attends to the negotiation of researcher-friend boundaries presented by studying middle class homes. I then provide a review of the literature regarding uncertainty, wellbeing, and the anthropology of the home on which this thesis builds.

METHODOLOGY

I WENT INTO the field intending to explore health and wellbeing in the home in relation to everyday practice. I was not asking for health details; rather I was interested in how people formed their everyday lives and to what extent they thought about either health or wellbeing. As I explained to participants: 'I'm interested in your everyday routines and how they might relate to health and wellbeing.' Fieldwork took place over the course of twelve months, from April 2015 to March 2016.

Providence, Rhode Island was first and foremost a practical choice. As household-based fieldwork can be difficult methodologically in terms of access to private spaces (D. Miller 2008), I decided to work in a city where I already had some contacts (described in more detail below). Since Providence is a small city and a leader in 'culture-led urban regeneration' (Miles and Paddison 2005) it also emerges as a case-study in post-industrial urban renewal.

Recruitment

I IMPLEMENTED a snowball, or a word-of-mouth, approach (D. L. Morgan 2012).[2] I began with households I knew from living and working in the city (in 2010 and 2013, described in more detail below). I asked if they would introduce me to others who might be interested in taking part in the research. This method had several benefits, primarily in allowing me more in-depth access through already established circles of trust and offering a pragmatic, safe choice for a lone female researcher entering homes.

I also recruited participants that I met in various community activities and events, including a neighbourhood association annual street clean up (April 2015) and a conference on hunger in Rhode Island (May 2015). Established participants led me to further community activities, which, in addition to being components of their everyday lives, offered background data on the city. These included a homelessness advocacy group, a low-income housing and urban gardening initiative that held a weekly farmers market, a yoga studio, two artists' collectives, and a variety of one-time events, such as the Providence International Arts Festival and a community dinner.

I decided to include participants who lived in Providence and the surrounding suburbs that formed Providence County, in part because neighbouring towns, such as Pawtucket, East Providence, or Cranston, are connected to Providence through urban sprawl even if they have their own unique identities. Providence County thus formed a natural boundary for inclusion in the study; interested parties who lived outside of Providence County were excluded. In order to be included, participants also had to have a significant tie to Providence if they did not live there, such as one or both partners working

[2] I originally planned to study a single street in Providence to increase diversity (D. Miller 2008; D. Miller and Parrott 2009), but this method was abandoned due to safety concerns.

in the city. The furthest household was twenty miles from the city, but the husband owned a business in Providence and the wife reported visiting so frequently for shopping, mom and baby play dates, and yoga, that her exorbitant fuel bills were a small point of marital tension; both had lived in the city in the past. Another household did not work in the city or visit too regularly, but they had lived there for most of their lives before moving to a neighbouring town; prior to this, they lived for 18 years in a house that once stood in the vacant lot where I parked my car.

Consent and Anonymity

AFTER AGREEING to a preliminary interview in their home, participants were given an information sheet and chance to read/ask questions before they gave oral consent to participate. Some participants asked for this information sheet ahead of our meeting, but most were happy to read it during the interview. Oral consent was recorded during the first interview. Participants were also told that they could take part in the research to the extent that they wished to. I explained that the minimum requirement was two interviews, but that if they were open to further engagement, they were welcome to invite me to visit or attend events with them. Several participants expressed that they would only do two interviews, while others were explicit in offering permission for me to research them throughout the year, particularly in the homes where I ended up spending more time. I reminded these participants throughout the course of fieldwork that I was taking notes on their everyday lives, particularly if sensitive topics emerged (e.g. I would say, *Do you mind if I write this down later?*). Utilising the snowball method meant only people who were fully interested in

participating took part. The information sheet is included in the appendix.

All participants are referred to by pseudonyms. While most participants' pseudonyms do not change throughout, on occasion they are given other pseudonyms to help protect anonymity (particularly if sensitive information is shared). Other identifying factors, such as the specifics of where they work and live are also left out of the thesis. All photographs are my own (unless otherwise noted) and are used with permission from the participants.

Households

WHILE THIS RESEARCH is not representative, I sought to capture a diverse range of households. I recruited participants at various points in the life course and across multiple types of living situations, particularly as the nuclear family in the urban US is no longer the norm (Valentine 1999). By the end of fieldwork, I included 19 homes/houses (dwellings) and 18 'households.' This distinction is because one couple lived in two homes in Providence. I consider them to be one 'household' as they were a couple that made decisions together and lived together most of the time in one home, but one partner had a separate studio because he liked having a space to be alone. I interviewed them together twice, once in each home. After this point of clarification, I refer only to the 18 'households.'

I succeeded in finding a diverse selection of household types: single adults (4), couples (6), families (6), and adults in shared housing (2). Amongst the families were one single parent household, one multigenerational household with no young children, and one household with university-aged children. The remainder had children under age 10 years. Of the 33 adults included, I managed to capture a range of ages, between 27 and 86 years, with a

concentration in the thirties and forties. While the majority of households were white, one household had a member of Native American (Cherokee) decent, one was Puerto Rican, and four households included first generation US citizens, with parents immigrating from India, Ghana, Argentina, and Italy. Occupations included university and other administration, social services, mental health, and self-employment. A significant proportion of the households (8 of 18) had self-employed members, including small business owners, artists (who hold other part-time jobs), or freelancers with private clients (e.g. independent therapist). The households are detailed in Appendix 1.

Data Collection

DATA COLLECTION can be broken down into several distinct levels of engagement: two semi-formal interviews (conducted with all 18 households); two interviews with additional infrequent visits; homestays (two-three days staying with a household); and 'significant' time spent with households, ranging from monthly dinners to weekly encounters to co-habitation. The latter two groups had varying levels of depth. As Marianne Gullestad (1984) explains, the nature of home-based work—which often entails becoming friends with participants—put her 'in contact with some women more often than others,' (46) leading to varying levels of depth of data collection. As a female researcher, I became closer to the women in the study over time, particularly amongst families and couples, and so their experiences are often forefront in this thesis. Couples without children also tended to have more interest in spending time with me. In one household I became what Rachel Heiman (2015) refers to as 'an ethnographic babysitter' (21), spending significant time with this one

family for a particularly detailed account of everyday life. (The levels of engagement with each household are detailed in Appendix 1)

Participant Observation

THE HOME is constructed as the primary site of fieldwork. However, similar to other ethnographies of everyday life, much of my attention to home life extends to other sites: the workplace, shopping centres, and social establishments, which offer a more robust insight into everyday life (Miller, 2001; Nippert-Eng, 2010). This approach is well documented in home-based fieldwork. In her classic home-based ethnography of working mothers in Norway, *Kitchen Table Society*, Gullestad (1984) explains that 'by mapping out her participation in different activities, settings, and types of social relations, the social person and her round of life provides the empirical point of departure for an analysis of lifestyle and patterns of cultural themes…' (18). Rachel Heiman (2015) employs similar techniques in her ethnography of a New Jersey suburb, focusing on 'sites of public and private life' (21) that extended from the home to the sport-utility vehicle (SUV) to the mall. Thus, the 'multi-sited' (Marcus 1995) or 'multi-scalar' (Xiang 2013) nature of studying domestic space emerges both from the move between homes and the extensions of everyday life into the outside world. Although I attempted to encourage as many home-based visits as possible (such as inviting participants to my own home for dinner to encourage a reciprocal home-based relationship), it was clear that if I wanted to see some people regularly, it would have to be in public. Thus, participant observation took place in an urban, middle class way: over drinks at a bar, coffee at one of the many independent cafes, or a shared platter of oysters or other food. Other

times we met at farmers markets, went shopping together, took evening walks through Providence's neighbourhoods and bike rides along the bay, or went to yoga or the gym.

Living with participants for both long and short periods of time increased my access to everyday routines (Daniels 2010). During fieldwork, the first shared household I lived in was located in the Federal Hill neighbourhood of Providence, and I lived with a man in his late twenties working as a cook and a woman in her early thirties working in arts administration, both of whom I had known previously. We did not have a lease, the tenancy was month-to-month, and the landlord lived elsewhere. The second home was located further west in the same neighbourhood, and was shared with two women in their late twenties, both artists, that I met during fieldwork. Here we did have a lease and the landlady lived upstairs. Shared homes in Providence are often split between two and three people as not many apartments have more than three bedrooms. Like many cities, shared housing often exists between young, unmarried individuals as a means to save money on rent or for those who do not like to live alone. In our situations, both typical of the city, we split the cost of rent and utilities equally, shared in household chores through oral or unspoken agreements, and each had our own bedroom, food cabinet, area of the refrigerator, and shelf in the bathroom.

In addition to living in two shared homes for six months, homestays involved visiting a household for 3-4 days, and accompanying them wherever I was permitted to go (work, social events, etc.). Homestays were by and large not practically possible (due to lack of space or very busy schedules) and thus the majority of participant observation took place through visiting (Gullestad 1984).

Participant observation was recorded in field notes utilising Scrivener software, so

that notes could be arranged by day, week, and month and easily re-visited. I mainly recorded field notes in the morning as most socialising took place in the afternoon/evening (after work hours).

Theoretical approach to the interview

TWO SEMI-STRUCTURED or informal, audio-recorded interviews took place in each home. These interviews were open-ended conversations between researcher and host(s) (Skinner 2012). I used interviews with caution. In anthropological studies of the home, the interview process has been critiqued for its 'overemphasis on meaning' and individual storytelling (Daniels 2015). Further, while they capture 'aural soundscapes,' they do not capture 'physical bodyscapes' (Skinner, 2012:33). The privileging of the verbal, or one sense over another, can exclude what we can gain from engaging with other senses, such as kinaesthetic movement (Potter 2008; Skinner 2012). However, traditional participant-observation in the home can be difficult due to time constraints or busy lives (Ewart and Luck 2013) and researchers have thus incorporated various media and collaborative methods to help account 'for the "flow" of everyday life' (Pink, 2011:31). These methods range from the use of video (Pink 2011) to the distribution packages which contain things like maps and a camera to encourage playful interaction (Ewart and Luck 2013).

With these concerns in mind, the audio-recorded interview initially served as a method of entry as people are familiar with the idea of an interview but struggled to comprehend participant observation. If more access was gained to a household, interviews became a supplement to participant observation and a way to allow participants to respond

to my reflections. Aware that many participants would only be interested in taking part in interviews, I structured them to be more interactive, accounting for movement in the home. This included taking a tour of the home, where I physically followed participants through their interpretation of an average day. I decided against video-recording interviews because I felt it would make people too self-conscious or encourage performance and found that participants rejected my attempts at participatory photography (see *Photography* below).[3] I instead relied on object-elicitation during audio-recorded interviews, asking people about things, spaces, routines, and experiences during interviews and encouraging them to tour me through the home space. This encouraged sensory participation and movement without technological surveillance.[4]

I also attempted to make the audio-recorded interviews more dynamic by including as many adult members of the household as possible, so that experiences could be contested and interpersonal dynamics explored (Kaufman 1998). Interviewing couples in tandem with participant observation allowed for me to witness the reconstruction of stories based on the presence of another household member, or in many cases, friends (Kaufman 1998). The group interview also foregrounded couples and other household members in the interview conversation, as they often asked one another questions and held tangential conversations.

[3] While Sarah Pink (2011) highlights some of the drawbacks of visual methods used in other studies, she is generally hopeful about the potential of video methods to engage with the spatial and sensory aspects of everyday life in the home. Citing Sunderland and Denny's book, *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, she notes that 'participant-produced video diaries arouse anxiety about the "performed" nature of participants' video-recorded activities on the part of clients' (447). While I share this perhaps unnecessary concern and might have been biased in my decision, my participants also rejected my attempts at visual methods. Several flatly refused to be video recorded. Participant-recorded video diaries might have been a way for them to not be seen on screen, assuaging their own anxieties and also giving further access to their everyday lives. However, as I struggled to encourage early participants to even take photos on their phones to send or show to me later, I felt that video would be no different.

[4] Technological objects are also very distracting when there are small children present. Even the presence of a camera and a voice recorder elicited consistent interest from toddlers, and attempts to persuade them away from the technology played a distracting role in the interview.

Interviews further allowed for knowledge coproduction (Skinner 2012), particularly within homes where I spent significant time. The interview allowed for them to ask about my own research and reflect on their experiences of taking part. Several couples reported that the first interview had made them more conscious of their relationship with one another in the home, and they shared their reflections with me during the second interview.

Structure of Interviews

THE FIRST interview was very open-ended. I collected demographic details and a brief oral history, and then asked participants to give me a tour of their 'everyday routine' in the home from the time they wake up. This generally took us from the bedroom to the kitchen and ended with leisure spaces, giving a sense of the home of everyday practice. I then asked more direct questions about what participants did in their daily lives that we had not covered (interview questions are detailed in Appendix 3). I finished the interviews by asking people how they felt about their neighbourhood, the city of Providence, and Rhode Island.

The second interview was more explicitly about health and wellbeing. I developed the questions based off information I had collected about the individual households during the first interview. To begin, I asked each household if there were any changes since last interview and we had an open-ended discussion. I followed with individualised questions. I then asked a series of open-ended questions about health and wellbeing: '*What objects, spaces, or experiences in your everyday life do you think are: 1) important for your sense of wellbeing; 2) in the way of your sense of wellbeing; 3) healthy; 4) unhealthy*.' As this was a semi-formal interview, these

questions served merely as guides and individual interviews progressed in different ways. Participants' answers could be seen as what Ian Woodward (2001) calls "'minor" epiphanic objects' (116). In writing about taste, Woodward combines research on household objects with Denzin's biographical ethnography, where epiphanies describe 'problematic or crisis experience […] which in turn act as narrative resources for people to account for crises or changes in their lives' (116). These questions regarding health and wellbeing similarly tease out 'minor epiphanic objects' that highlight the conflicts between health and wellbeing and the body and self. 'Spaces and experiences' were added after participants struggled with solely thinking of objects when asked about health and wellbeing. Occasionally these questions led them to consider objects, spaces, or experiences outside of the home, sometimes to actual objects, and more often than not sparked musings about what the difference between health and wellbeing was. They tended to pick 2-3 things for each question.

I then asked if they felt that there was anything in a state of tension in the home, which also led to open-ended discussions or reflections on what had already been shared. I finished these interviews with the question: *What do you associate with Americanness, or what does being an American mean for you?* The vast, open-endedness of this question was designed to provoke some thoughtfulness over national identity and politics without asking direct questions. Second interviews often overlapped the presidential primaries and so sparked some political debate.

The first interviews took place all year long, depending on when participants were brought into the research. Most participants (particularly those who were a part of in-depth participant observation) were recruited and interviewed for the first time between April 2015

and September 2015. Nearly all of the second interviews took place between January and April 2016. As a generally rule, I liked to leave at least three months, and preferably six to nine, between each interview, but one household recruited after January 2016 had interviews a month apart. This time difference was preferred to note longer-term changes.

Photography

MY USE OF photography declined after participants rejected my 'participant visual research methods' (Lorenz and Kolb 2009). Originally, I distributed four questions about health and wellbeing (those asked in the second interview) to several test households[5] on a sheet of paper and asked them to text me photographs that responded to each question. I planned to do photo-elicitation exercises with them during the second interview. One household asked if they could just show me the answers during my visit. Another expressed that they did not want to send me photos. I quickly determined I would integrate the questions into my second interview as the live process of touring the home proved to be more dynamic, involving participants with their bodies, senses, and space.

Thus, photographs were mainly used as a tool of documentation (Parkin & Coomber 2009), with photos taken from a variety of angles in the key living spaces. These helped me ascertain commonalities and differences between households, and over time in the same households. During each semi-formal interview, I photographed the interior of the home, including kitchens, primary living spaces, bathrooms, and any other rooms I was admitted to. Participants were told they could decline having any aspect of their homes photographed. I

[5] These households were chosen simply because they were part of my initial access to the community studied, and were thus part of the early research development.

did not take photographs of outside spaces for confidentiality reasons. I also photographed spaces or items that were mentioned in the interviews, for my own recall, and the inside of every refrigerator. Photographing the refrigerator was an experimental sub-project to my research that proved useful in eliciting information about diets, shopping, cooking, storage, and ultimately family life (these will be explored in Chapter Three). People also often showed me closets, storage spaces, garages, basements, and other mostly hidden components of the home. Photography, like the interview, became more of a supplement to participant observation.

Reflections on Doing Ethnography 'At Home' in Homes

WHILE PROVIDENCE is not my native city, it is a part of New England, a region of the US that I identify as my home. My sense of New England is interwoven with the knowledge I've come to gather—both historical and empirical—over the past four years of living between Rhode Island and Oxford. Providence is located about 100 miles (161 km) from where I grew up, in the neighbouring state of Connecticut. I grew up in the countryside, about a thirty-minute drive from the capital city of Hartford. I first moved to Providence in 2010 for a job as a researcher in a small occupational health consulting company located in neighbouring Massachusetts. I lived there for a year and made very few contacts as I travelled extensively around the country and internationally for work. After my masters course at Oxford from 2011-2012, I moved back to Providence in January of 2013 and worked for the same company but in a more stationary capacity. I thus began to develop a greater sense of the city and before I came back to Oxford in April of 2014, I had made a

few contacts that later formed primary access points for this research. My sense that Providence would make a fruitful research focus was formed during this year (2013-2014). I began to take photos during my meanderings of the city for a blog about Providence's material culture—or the city in the absence of human presence.

Anthropologists have long recounted concerns about doing anthropological work within their home contexts, including the ability of the ethnographer to offer an adequate outside perspective (those cited herein include Heiman 2015; Strathern 1987; Gullestad 1984). Marilyn Strathern (1987) draws particular attention to how ethnographers author their encounters. Writing that 'what "our" representations of others will mean must depend in part on what "their" representations mean to them' (23). What might be seen as exploitation of others stories in one context, might be construed as a sharing of meaning in another. As writers of their home culture, anthropologists face a unique conundrum. 'The challenge of anthropology at home,' she writes, 'is that […] the ethnographer becomes *author* in relation to those being studied. The proposition rests on there being continuity between their cultural constructs and his/hers. For they too analyse and explain their behavior as much as he/she does. At base they are agreed that "society" or "culture" can be conceptualized as an object of study' (26). In her own example, a Malay anthropologist in Malay society is not the same as a Western anthropologist in Western society, because the very concepts anthropologists use stem from Western thought.

In this vein, many of my participants and I use a common vocabulary that rarely sparks disagreement, and so it is at points difficult to discern the difference between my analysis and participant choice of words. I have tried to be specific throughout about the origins of language. Words or phrases in quotes, such as 'energy,' often signify common

terms that participants used. Like many burgeoning anthropologists, I share an anxiety about how my participants' might perceive my representations of their lives. I've been cautious in my criticism, and drawn attention more to the details of their habits, situating their words in context as much as possible. Undoubtedly, my representations will not accurately define their lives—they are rather part of ephemeral moments of interaction that border the subjectivity of friendship.

One of the most difficult things about doing fieldwork in my home region and in the intimate spaces of middle class homes was attending to the boundaries of researcher and friend. As with other research into everyday lives at home, the roles of researcher and friend are often combined. Friendship—in the very least being included in social events—is a part of negotiating intimate access to everyday lives, lest the research role remain prominent, thereby limiting the depth of data (Gullestad 1984). Participants understood me to be researching them whenever we were together, both inside and outside the home. The social sciences were not foreign to them, even if they did not have explicit anthropological training. Many worked in jobs where they were exposed to social science research, such as mental and public health professions or academic administration, and some had friends who were social science researchers. Most liked the idea of being a part of the research as long as they remained anonymous. For many, anonymity seemed to provide the only barrier they needed to share what I would consider very personal information about themselves, friends, and family. I developed an organic method of 'checking in' to attend to some of the sensitive topics that emerged. This might be asking 'Do you mind if I write this down later?' or 'Do you mind if I ask you more questions about that for my research?' More often than not, however, my role as researcher disappeared into the background and when it was brought

up, participants tended to shrug it off.

As Gullestad noted in her own work, they were proud of having an anthropologist as a friend and we would occasionally joke about my studying them. Further, as a close contact interested in their everyday worlds, a good listener, and an active help when things went wrong, they tended to appreciate my presence. My own engagements were actively tempered, managing emotional exhaustion. When I realised most of my evenings were entirely scheduled to fit within others' schedules and that I had to 'schedule in' time to recover, I had to begin apologising to those I did not have time to see. One participant reflected that being 'busy' probably gave me its own insight into everyday life in this community. Through this intensive scheduling and compartmentalising of time, I was made to feel I had 'gone native.' This scheduling also offered a boundary to my field-friendships as I could actively schedule in time away, giving me some distance from individual participants and my field site.

Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Class

ANTHROPOLOGY in the US context is particularly attuned to race, ethnicity, and class. This is in part because these are key areas of interest for sociologists and in part because of a critical turn in the social sciences that seeks to identify and explore historical contexts for current societal concerns, such as inequality (Little 2014). While I elaborate on where my ethnography fits into the US-anthropological literature in Chapter Two, here I want to attend to some of the methodological considerations that race, ethnicity, gender, and class gave rise to as I designed and bound my final field site.

My own academic training is rooted in gender studies, which thoroughly attended to the basic theories and methodologies present in the academy from 2004-2008. During this time I grew to admire the work of feminists in the US who delved into the nuances of the intersections of race, sexuality, gender, class, ethnicity in their everyday lives. In the words of feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1998), 'rather than examining gender, race, class, and nation as distinctive social hierarchies, intersectionality examines how they mutually construct one another' (62). Intersectionality involved both theoretical and methodological attention. Maria Lugones' (1987) concept of 'world travelling'—or entering another's world in the spirit of both playfulness and friendship—became the method through which I have approached my fieldwork. Playfulness can be most simply understood as the reminder that we should never take ourselves too seriously. Friendship, on the other hand, is a non-imperialist answer to working with other races, and is described as 'the only sensical motivation' for entering another's world because the 'task at hand [is] extraordinarily difficult.' Lugones suggests that travelling to other's worlds—and attending to both playfulness and friendship within them—is a way in which we can begin to come to know and love the Other (she differentiates this type of love from romantic or intimate love). These reflections have informed my methodological approach regardless of race: if I really wanted to ethically attend to the different household-worlds in which I was confronted with, friendship, playfulness, and world-travelling, it seemed, was a method I needed to adopt. Thus, while in my fieldwork I did not consider gender as a method of analysis, feminist methods have long been integrated into my academic practice. Further, due to the nature of being a female researching in domestic space, much of my attention to detail and depth comes from time spent with female participants. However, as many of my participants are

male, this should also not be considered a study about gender.

In designing this research, I was interested in sustaining as much 'diversity' as possible in the homes studied. Diversity included not just race and ethnicity, but household types and sexual orientations. This desire also stemmed from my interest in intersectionality. Collins (1998) articulates how the notion of family in the US intersects gender, race, and 'nation,' illuminating the 'ideological constructs of family' and naming the family a 'rich site for intersectional analysis' (64). The reality of my work is that despite continued efforts to 'diversify' the households studied, the snowball method made it difficult to extend outside of the bounds of the white middle class. However, the snowball method gave me insight into just how embodied segregation is in Rhode Island. Many of my initial participants seemed to be wholly unaware of the 'whiteness' of their friendship circles, although when I brought it up, they agreed. The formation of the city neighbourhoods was often blamed. Gentrification over time (discussed in the next section) in the city of Providence itself has changed neighbourhoods, pushing ethnic groups out of the central/eastern areas of the city.

What I refer to as 'embodied segregation' is best described by a casual interview with a woman in her mid-20s in a café. While she did not end up being in the research, she was happy to meet with me (this was common in the beginning months of fieldwork). We discussed an assortment of topics, from past jobs to her wardrobe. As we neared the end of our coffee, a man approached us to talk about an activist project in Rhode Island—he spoke fast, in a way that canvassers often do, so that we could not interrupt. This is an excerpt from my field notes that illustrates an example of white confusion over how race should be treated, and that both unconscious and embodied forms of racism and blatant racism is alive and well:

I thought he was about to leave when he said, 'I just wanted to point out because maybe you can't tell from this picture that our keynote speaker is African American,' and he turned to Carey, who is 'African American.' I could imagine her skin colour might have never come up in my research were it not for this event and were I to only record how people verbally self-identify. As he said it, I immediately felt my own body tense and I thought, 'oh my god, is he really going to direct whatever he is going to say next at her because she is black?' I glanced up at Carey a couple times and otherwise stared down at the yellow paper he handed us. She had the same disinterested stare in her face. He went on about how he was proud/happy to say that their keynote speaker was African American because there was a divide in the climate change activism and people think of it as a white person's movement. This wasn't the case before, he said. He said, originally climate change was being brought to attention by Jesse Jackson and that it was an African American movement (this is where I really started to get uncomfortable/annoyed). 'And like you,' he said at one point, and then stumbled, 'because you are African American [pause] At least I think you are African American, because you look like it.' (Oh my god, I thought, wanting to say something but feeling like it was not my place and wondering if she would). She glanced at him slightly.

When he left, we looked at one another and laughed awkwardly, and were silent for a minute because he was still close, and when he was far enough away I said in a low voice: 'That was uncomfortable' and 'I couldn't believe he said that to you.' I asked her what she thought of that interaction. She said that she could tell he was going to bring up the fact that she was black, and that she thought 'you don't have to do this' before he launched into it. She said, 'I can tell the guy is black in the picture, he doesn't have to bring it up.' She told me that these types of things are fairly common, especially when she is in particular places. She looked around the cafe, sizing up who was there, and said, 'when I am in spaces like this, where there aren't really any—' she paused and finished 'people of colour'. 'Where everyone is white?' I added, chuckling and she smiled a little and said, 'yeah.' In these spaces, people 'say weird things to her,' she says. She went on to explain that she is often in these spaces, because, 'well, I guess because of what I like' and that she does not often find herself in black spaces. She said she noticed also that when she meets other black people in these white spaces, she also has weird interactions and that they tend to be cold to her. She said she didn't really know why, but she thought it was because there is an underlying assumption that people who are alike should connect with one another and she thought that people were possibly reacting against that and doing the opposite (in other words, from what I understood, white people might think, oh you two should meet because you are both black, or both 'of colour' so the black people she met reacted against this and were cold to one another). She also said 'I don't know where the black spaces even are. I've never been in one here' and 'where I live really isn't that diverse.' I agreed and said that Brown University is also not very diverse, and the youthful East Side is dominated by this academic circle - she agreed. We changed the subject soon after, not because it was awkward, but because I think she just seemed like she didn't really want to talk about it.

This extract from my field notes also exhibits some of the overlaps of affluence and race through our discussion of the affluent 'East Side.' Whereas in the past there were more blatant desires to remove certain ethnic groups from neighbourhoods like the East Side, race and class are intertwined in the gentrification of Providence today, where property prices

force long-term residents out.

Despite the embodied forms of segregation in many (not all) of my white participants, awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement following accounts of police brutality across the US was present throughout my fieldwork. Black Lives Matter began as a social media protest using the hash tag #blacklivesmatter after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighbourhood watch coordinator who shot and killed an African-American high school student, Trayvon Martin, in 2012 (R. Miller 2016). Black Lives Matter gained national attention during demonstrations after the police killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014. The movement drew attention to the racism embedded in police (and other) brutality. Participants often referenced the movement in casual conversation, and as a primarily liberal population, expressed concern and outrage at police brutality. Few 'felt' they were racist, and most openly supported the movement; however, in the words of a participant whose parents were from Puerto Rico, *we're all racist, it's not being aware of this that's the problem.*

I was surprised by a similar difficulty in recruiting households that did not contain heterosexual adults (one household was composed of a gay couple and three other female participants considered themselves to be bisexual, but were currently in relationships with heterosexual men). There has been a recent surge of work on the 'queer' home, which challenges the heteronormative constructs that haunt anthropological and sociological studies of domesticity (Gorman-Murray and Cook 2017). I lament that my research has little to contribute to this dialogue due to this lack of representation, and reiterate the difficulties with finding willing households through the snowball method. The ultimate ethnic, racial, and household-type diversity is detailed in Appendix 1.

Considering what I have discussed above, it would be dangerous to make any assumptions that are not rooted participants' own explanations of identity. I have thus made a decision to bring up ethnicity in my ethnographic vignettes when it become relevant, such as when participants talk about their ethnic backgrounds, as opposed to introducing them as 'African American' or 'Indian.' At times I speak of immigrants or second generation US citizens, as several of the households had parents who were born in other countries (India, Ghana, Argentina, and Italy). These individuals often referenced family in other countries and were more likely to explicitly talk about race. The participant with family from Puerto Rico discussed racism with me openly, both because it was something she taught to undergraduates and in reference to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Until this point, I have referenced the households as 'middle class' under the explanation that they all self-identified as middle class. I asked participants: *How would you describe your economic situation?* This open-endedness allowed me to attend to their sense of economic security/in-security instead of quantifying them with national economic standards. Their descriptions ranged from statements like, *some months it's literally down to the dollar,* to, *I think we are very comfortable, maybe even upper-middle class.* I was further able to discern relative wealth from their jobs, home-value,[6] and the stories they told me upon visiting. I prefer to think of the households studied as not wealthy but 'materially secure.' This phrase is not meant to draw conclusions about their relative material security in comparison to others, but rather to highlight that they are not food insecure and their housing situations are not in threat due to financial constraints. All households felt they could provide for their families,

[6] For those participants that owned homes, property values ranged from $150,000 to $500,000, with most under $300,000. The highest valued participant owned-home in the research ($500,000) contained two units, one of which was rented out, providing additional income. The average property value in Providence County is $200,000 ("Providence County, RI: Housing" 2015).

even if it necessitated careful budgeting. On the other side of the spectrum, I excluded households that had too much monetary wealth; three households expressed interest, but I did not follow-up after an initial visit to the home. Class is discussed at more length throughout the thesis, particularly in relation to notions of material security and precarity.

TOWARDS AN UNCERTAINTY OF THE EVERYDAY

THE EVOCATION OF UNCERTAINTY in relation to physical, mental, and environmental health—and to the quality and sustainability of everyday lives—is neither new nor novel, yet a notion of uncertainty *in the everyday*, particularly in the Western context, is poorly theorised in the anthropological literature. While uncertainty is discussed frequently in anthropology, theoretical framings remain surprisingly isolated. Part of the work of this thesis is to define what an uncertainty of the everyday is. Without a definitive core body of work to turn to, this section provides a review of anthropological literature on uncertainty and situates it within broader cultural reflections on uncertainty in contemporary Western thought, which is a part of the cultural context of my ethnography.

Anthropological interest in how people make sense of the unknown, particularly around health and disease, has early roots in studies of magic, ritual and religion, such as the use of witchcraft to explain misfortune (Evans-Pritchard 1976). More recently, anthropological and sociological accounts of uncertainty tend to take two forms: the exploration of conditions of precarity or insecurity, such as the large amount of literature on uncertainty in Africa (Cooper and Pratten 2015), and accounts of uncertainty in the West, where the notion of an increasingly 'uncertain world' takes shape (Gusterson and Besteman

2010; Bauman 2007; Butler 2004; Giddens 1999). This Western 'uncertain world' has come into being from the fractures of post-modernity and globalisation, where past societal structures have crumbled, leaving the efforts of intensive reflexive reconstruction in their wake (Giddens 1999; Bauman 2007). Some have argued that in the precarious, neoliberal world, increasing privatisation at the expense of decreasing social welfare systems since the 1980s has exacerbated insecurity (Gusterson and Besteman 2010), while increased scientific knowledge and subsequent dissemination of information have highlighted potential risks (Boholm 2003; Gusterson and Besteman 2010). Climate change discourses have also brought greater ecological changes to the fore (Petryna 2015). More popular intellectual musings on global uncertainty have followed US-based events, with an increase in publishing on the uncertain world after 9/11 (see for instance Bauman, 2007; Butler, 2004). Others emphasise how uncertainty, reframed as ambiguity, has been harnessed as a creative force (see for instance Holmes, 2015; Luna & Renninger, 2015).

One of the primary aims of this thesis is to examine just how *everyday* experiences of uncertainty actually are. In doing so I question the negative associations to uncertainty. Uncertainty has become something of a catchall phrase to encapsulate a variety of negative experiences. Words like precarity, insecurity, and risk are not far from accounts of uncertainty. *Precarity* and *insecurity*—which evoke unreliable circumstances, perhaps material, political, or social-psychological in nature—have been explored in anthropology around the inequalities and insecurities produced by neoliberalism, globalism, migration, and health, disease and biomedical technologies (Jenkins, Jessen, and Steffen 2005; Dumnit 2010). *Risk* has been the dominant construct to discuss the unknown in Western societies (Whyte 2005), it deserves some attention, particularly as to why I chose to discuss uncertainty over risk.

Anthony Giddens (1999) suggests that the term risk is only in wide usage in societies that are 'future oriented' (22), recognising the future as something to be controlled by human action, not fate, luck, or will of the gods. Giddens and others (Lupton 2013; N. Rose 2007) have tied the development of the contemporary notion of risk to modernity, dominated first by technological advancement and rational thinking, and then by the post-modern questioning of established thought, an era 'characterised by uncertainty and ambivalence related to constant change and flux, cultural fragmentation and the breakdown of norms and tradition' (Lupton, 2013:11). Individuals experience the 'intensifying sense of uncertainty, complexity, ambivalence and disorder, a growing distrust of social institutions and traditional authorities and an increasing awareness of the threats inherent in everyday life' (Lupton, 2013:11-12). In contrast, Mary Douglas' (Mary Douglas 1992) cultural theory approach to risk focuses more on the potentiality of the Other, as well as the destabilising nature of the body. 'Otherness is dangerous because it confounds order and control' (Lupton, 2013:129), challenging the individual's sense of its self in the world.

'Risk,' in its potential for negative outcomes, requires a necessary management (Giddens 1999). For the individual at home, everyday worlds become infused with micro-decisions around potential risks to the individual body or household (Rosenberg 2012; Giddens 1999). Moral panics surrounding obesity and other public health concerns often criticise people's supposed 'life-style' choices, like eating unhealthy food, smoking, or drinking alcohol, that put them and their children at risk for disease (Bell, Salmon, and McNaughton 2011). Ultimately, the individual is held responsible. Robert Crawford (2006) coined the term 'healthism' to describe a 'moralization of health among middle class Americans' which extended this 'enthusiasm for health promotion' to wellbeing, encouraging

individuals to manage their own bodies and health through everyday self projects (410). Crawford notes that the ever-increasing focus on the perils of everyday life is 'more likely to destabilize rather than augment the ideological utilities of self-control' (416).

Striving for scientific certainty can also create further uncertainty. Biomedical practices are a key example. At the same time as a quest for diagnosis can be a key component of medical practice, this very quest has led to further doubt about the efficacy of certain medications, as evidenced both by the placebo effect and pharmaceutical scandals that challenge public trust in medicine (Leibing 2009). Ethicists have also pointed to corporate desires to 'manufacture' uncertainty about the risks of certain products, such as tobacco, asbestos, or sugar. As public knowledge about the risks of each of these products grew, corporate scientists and marketing teams responded by questioning the validity of unfavourable 'scientific' information or promoting the health benefits of their products (Egilman, Bird, and Lee 2014; Michaels 2008; Conway and Oreskes 2012).

In her critique of risk, Åsa Boholm (2003) writes that 'the concept of risk can be understood as a framing device which conceptually translates uncertainty from being an open-ended field of unpredicted possibilities into a bounded set of possible consequences' (167). She argues that 'when uncertainty has a positive flavour we speak of 'luck' or good 'fortune' and when uncertainty is tainted by dismal or catastrophic expectations we speak of 'risk'' (167). Whilst scholars recognise the pleasurable and positive nature of risk—such as risk-taking behaviours as an escape from everyday life, the reflexive production of the self through new activities, and the flexibility and adaptability inspired by entrepreneurial risk—'risk' often disguises the productive and creative possibilities infused in uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten 2015).

This thesis examines the capability of uncertainty to inspire creativity, imagination, and togetherness. Ambiguity captures the complexity of uncertainty. Boholm (2003) reminds that uncertainty itself is ambiguous: 'In real life situations, the boundary between certitude and uncertainty is of course seldom razor-sharp, and vagueness and ambiguity tend to be the rule rather than the exception' (168). Experiencing uncertainty as ambiguity, and seeing its creative potential, has been of interest to numerous writers, scholars, and businesses (Holmes 2015; Nowotny 2016; Luna and Renninger 2015; Wilf 2015). In his book *Nonsense: the Power of Not Knowing,* Jamie Holmes (2015) argues that embracing 'not knowing' is a quality that benefits society: 'in an increasingly complex, unpredictable world, what matters most isn't IQ, willpower, or confidence in what we know. It's how we deal with what we don't understand' (15). 'As uncertainties add up,' he later explains, 'they ultimately accelerate the drive towards certainty' or the psychological 'need for closure.' Tolerance for ambiguity has been recognised as a personality trait in psychology since 1948, which clinical and organisational psychologists today tend to see as 'a measure of adaptation and healthy functioning' (Furnham and Marks 2013). While I do not engage with the psychological literature in depth herein, this thesis explicitly explores uncertainty as entangled with subjective wellbeing and thus raised questions about the productive nature of ambiguity throughout.

In highlighting creative responses to uncertainty, it is important to problematize free-market liberalism. Within the business world, creative responses to uncertainty are romanticised and individuals who exhibit adaptability are desired (O'Malley 2015). Melissa Gregg (2009) writes about how the new worker must show qualities of 'flexibility' and 'dealing with change,' which are now ranked higher than accumulated knowledge or a

positive 'demeanour.' Similarly, Eitan Wilf (2015) notes that management theories have undergone a transformation with the rise of the 'creative class.' They now look to 'harness creative uncertainty and potentiality as a resource for boosting productivity and creating value' (31). Under neoliberal thought, the free-market offers *possibility* in its uncertainty, where learning to adapt is a good thing: it is what makes successful businessmen capable of 'pivoting,' or changing focus, when a business start-up is failing or when new opportunities arise (O'Malley 2015). Yet, as Brett Neilsen and Ned Rossiter (2005) note, this 'creative labour' is ultimately precarious and uncertain. In drawing attention to the valorisation of uncertainty under the tenants of the neoliberal free market, Pat O'Malley (2015) poses that the 'key question' is not '"does uncertainty make us free?" but rather, "what kind of uncertainty makes us what kind of free?"' (28). I argue throughout that the problem of the creative management of uncertainty as articulated under free market liberalism is the capitalistic *expectation* of self-responsibility and creative adaptation, drawing attention away from the structural inequalities that prevent people from taking part as well as the everyday nuances of 'improvisation' and creativity.

Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam's (2007) notion of 'improvisation' in relation to creativity offers a more anthropological framework for creative responses to uncertainty. Creativity, they venture, 'has come to be seen as a major driver of economic prosperity and social well-being' (1), where creative individuals are considered to thrive in a knowledge-based economy. Their premise is that an anthropological approach to creativity must challenge the notion that creativity is a novel human activity and suggest that humans are rather 'compelled to improvise' in everyday life (2). An improvisational creativity, they argue, acknowledges the world as constantly being made, whereas thinking of creativity solely as

moments of innovation is to see it in retrospect. In reality, they posit, continuity and change function in tandem (7). They describe improvisation as generative, relational, temporal, and 'the way we work' making it a basic way of living, and way of living with one another, that 'goes along "ways of life" that are as entangled and mutually responsive as are the paths of pedestrians on the street' (7).

The anthropology of uncertainty similarly broadens the notion of risk—and its negative connotations—to the creative negotiation of uncertainty, nuancing both the problematic necessity of creativity under conditions of precarity and the potential laced within it. In writing of the African context, Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten (2015) describe uncertainty as a 'social resource and can be used to negotiate insecurity, conduct and create relationships, and act as a source for imagining the future with the hopes and fears this entails' (2). They draw attention to how lived experience is entwined in social relations, which can both create and alleviate uncertainty. They describe uncertainty as 'a structure of feeling' – 'the lived experience of a pervasive sense of vulnerability, anxiety, hope, and possibility mediated through the material assemblages that underpin, saturate, and sustain everyday life' (1).

The interactional quality of uncertainty is echoed in other anthropological accounts. In an uncertainty-themed issue of *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Francois Berthomé et al. (2012) recognise that uncertainty involves ongoing interactions with both humans and other 'non-standard protagonists'—such as witches. Of the collection in the special issue, they write that:

> uncertainty does not appear as an ontological quality of the social world, nor as a psychological state of individuals, but rather as an emergent property of the interactional dynamics in which the participants are necessarily caught. (135)

Similarly, in a volume that addresses uncertainty in medical anthropology, Richard Jenkins et al. (2005) describe its social and material aspects:

> …control and uncertainty are always negotiated within social relations… In the face of indeterminacy, people everywhere struggle to influence, even if they cannot completely control, the present and future situations […] Substances, artefacts and techniques—medicines and technologies, or rituals and magic—offer various means by which we attempt to cope with or control illness and misfortune. (11)

Thus uncertainty is most simply framed as a basic human response to the unknown; this is what I call 'everyday uncertainty.' It is often triggered by mutable circumstances, which are embedded in social relations, and attended to through a variety of techniques. Everyday uncertainty is mediated and experienced on multiple scales, moving from the ontological or existential and often embodied experiences of the individual to the structures of national and global precarity that sustain material insecurity or force creative adaptation. Recognising these scales helps nuance a tension between individual responsibility and neoliberal expectations about how we manage the future.

Uncertainty is ultimately *a framework* through which I explore how a selection of middle class households negotiated transitions and change, the unknown future, and the potential imbued in everyday life. Some of these aspects—disruption, trauma, and aspiration—have emerged in other ethnographies of everyday life, but they have been recognised through the lens of class and identity (Heiman 2015; Ortner 2003) or morality and ethics (Mattingly 2014b). In tying this framework to current trends in the anthropology of the home, I argue that an uncertainty framework attends to an aspect of 'in-betweenness' embedded in everyday life. In his exploration of atmosphere in Denmark, Mikkel Bille (2013) takes issue with the ontological turn in anthropology, arguing that in taking experiences at face value ('the candlelight does not *represent* cosiness but *is* cosiness') we

overlook what is ambivalent or indefinite in the worlds of our informants. He argues for taking informants 'undecidedness' at face value 'in order to explore how concepts and objects unfold in messy ways through vague, and at times contradictory premises' (259). 'Vagueness should, in this respect, be taken seriously both theoretically and methodologically, while at times clear expression should be taken with caution.' (270) In many ways, this thesis attends to the human experiences of ambiguity and ambivalence, which is often characterised by uncertainty or undecidedness. While ambivalence is methodologically pertinent to the discipline of anthropology (Kierans and Bell 2017) and anthropologists have long attended to the structural and ontological qualities which make up the cultures of everyday life, much more can be done with the in-between: that which is hard to articulate or impossible to see, neither subject nor object, something sensed, but not necessarily known. Uncertainty—or the absence of certainty—is both ontological and structural, felt by individuals and created by political, economic, and social structures. But it is also the ongoing possibility that life as we know it will change: eventually, we will die; at some point, there might be a knock on the door; eventually the house will have to be dusted. Our encounters with uncertainty as humans are fraught with contradiction. At points, it offers us creative possibility; at other points, it sparks anxiety and fear. This is because it is both ungraspable and ubiquitous. You almost have to squint your eyes a little bit for it to take its own shape.

I imagine uncertainty as the 'negative space' of certainty; it is the unknown surrounding the known. In art and design, *negative space* describes the space around a form in a composition. A good composition has 'interesting' negative space, which is itself often composed of shapes, colours, textures, and lines. As a negative space, uncertainty takes form

in this thesis through various actions, specifically objects and practices in the home (the 'positive space'). Each action offers a different perspective on what the uncertainty at hand is about. I will examine the extent to which these actions provide a collaged landscape through which 'everyday uncertainty' begins to take form.

WELLBEING, HAPPINESS, AND THE GOOD LIFE

REFLECTING ON ANTHROPOLOGICAL theory since the 1980s, Sherry Ortner (2016) recognises that anthropological accounts of the 'atmosphere of insecurity' and 'precariousness of life under neoliberalism' (37), or what she terms 'dark anthropology' have dominated anthropological responses to the neoliberal turn. She notes that 'dark anthropology' has been more recently met with what Joel Robbins calls 'an anthropology of the good' (Robbins 2013), which includes increased research into wellbeing (Ortner 2016). This thesis in part straddles these two supposed perspectives, but in attending to the banal everyday of the materially secure home, uncertainty and wellbeing become entangled, making it at points difficult to see how people can be uncomfortable, insecure, or anxious and still consider that they are living the good life.

Unlike uncertainty, which is presented as a framework of analysis, wellbeing was a term that I used to describe my research to participants, and thus is in many ways embedded in the type of data that was produced. I focused on wellbeing as tied to health, telling participants directly that this was a study of 'health and wellbeing.'[7] At the time, wellbeing

[7] The WHO integrated wellbeing into its definition of health in its constitution: 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' ("Constitution of the World Health Organization: Principles" 1948). Relatedly, the WHO defines mental health

was chosen as a term that people in this region understood to be reflective of their overall sense of health and happiness. In context, wellbeing is fraught with neoliberal economics. The 'wellness' industry[8] in the US is a part of the increasing privatisation of health promotion (Kickbusch and Payne 2003). Crawford (2006) describes how since the 1980s, 'the burgeoning enthusiasm for health promotion was extended to a vastly larger sphere of well-being – body, mind and spirit – described in the language of time as "holistic"' (410), which 'radically expanded the quest for health beyond medical practices' (411) and made health a 'super-value' (411). 'The pursuit of the good life,' he writes, 'was reinvented as a quest for health' by the middle class (411). Robbins (2015) notes that happiness has also 'made a major push recently in the Euro-American hierarchy of values […] at the crossroads of psychology, economics, and political discourse, some Euro-American elites are lobbying hard to get happiness to the top of their own countries' evaluative charts' (215). While 'the pursuit of happiness' is ingrained in the US's motivational founding document, the Declaration of Independence, its entanglement with enhancement technologies has gained both support and criticism. Enhancement technologies 'aim to improve human characteristics, including appearance and mental or physical functioning, often beyond what is "normal" or necessary for life and well-being' (Hogle 2005). The ethics of using biotechnologies to enhance the self has been explored extensively including a President's Council on Bioethics 2003 report entitled Beyond therapy: Biotechnology and the pursuit of happiness (Caplan and Elliott 2004). Ethicist Carl Elliot criticises the focus on enhancement

as 'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community' ("Mental Health: A State of Well-Being" 2014)

[8] The Global Wellness Institute, an international think-tank, reported in 2014 that the global wellness market was three times larger than the worldwide pharmaceutical industry ("Global Spa and Wellness Economy Monitor" 2014).

and happiness as being over-enthusiastically supported by big pharma (Elliot 2003; Caplan and Elliott 2004).[9] Despite his interest in the good life, Robbins is also critical of 'happiness' being 'in vogue,' questioning if it is the complacent, neoliberal outcome of the 2008 recession: 'If the only innovation we end up with out of this ferment, at least on the elite academic and policy levels, is a concern with "nudging" us toward happiness regardless of the state of the world around us, one has to wonder how much will really have changed' (216). I consider happiness in the US context again in Chapter Five.

Yet, wellbeing is of interest to anthropologists because it draws attention to the facets of everyday life that are not always measurable, asking deeper questions about meaning, values, morals, and actions that constitute the making of the good life. Wellbeing is recognised as being culturally embedded and locally produced, tied into morality, meaning-making, sensuality and pleasure, and intimate social worlds (Fischer 2014; Walker and Kavedžija 2015). Ethnographic accounts of happiness and pursuits of the good life are related and give further insight into what constitutes wellbeing.

Joel Robbins (2015) highlights how 'happiness somewhat reworks the standard ethnographic construction of time' (216). He attempts to tease out the temporal quality of happiness, which appears in ethnographic accounts in a special issue of HUA, as both 'momentary, hedonic bursts of feeling and more long-term, eudaimonic-type feelings of contentment and judgments of happiness' (225). While the relationship between the two—'the nature of good lives'—is 'different in different places' (229), attention to the temporal

[9] Emotional management and enhancement has become a compelling American project, mediated by the 'therapeutic expertise' and 'technical intervention' (Williams 2001: 10) of the 'emotion industry' (Crossley 2000), which has made emotions more public through the formulation of appropriate spaces (e.g. therapist office) and interventions (e.g. anti-depressants) for the regulation of emotions (Nicholson 1997). Such publicity has commoditized emotion, 'furthering a view of the self that is endlessly malleable' (Nicholson 1997: 13). Advancements in neuroscience and biotechnologies have only increased the potential for 'enhancement' (Hogle 2005).

quality of happiness is necessary to be able to disentangle short-term desires and long-term goals. The long-term is more likely to be deeply embedded in the values of particular societies ('socially shared and stable judgment on what it means to live a good life' (220)), and also how 'those values relate to each other' (229). In her work with Bangladeshi migrants in London, Katy Gardner (2015) concludes that anthropologists 'must also distinguish between the promise of happiness and the more pragmatic project of well-being' (210). For Bangladeshi migrants, happiness is an individual emotion that might be ignored in favour of long-term wellbeing of the group. This temporal quality of both wellbeing and uncertainty is examined and commented upon throughout this thesis. I consider circumstances and experiences of uncertainty to be sometimes happening in the moment and passing within hours or a few days, and sometimes taking place throughout the course of months or years. I consider how participants balance short-term feelings of happiness with long-term desires to live a good life.

In his review of the anthropology of wellbeing Edward Fischer (2014) describes three non-material qualities that define the good life: the 'capacity for aspiration as well as the agency and opportunity to make realising aspirations seem viable'; dignity and fairness; and commitment to a larger purpose (5). While these capabilities are theoretically available to all, structures of inequality and poverty can prevent many from participating in individual aspiration and collective making of the future. Attending to this problem of poverty, Appadurai (2013) describes how aspirations to 'the good life' are layered, located on a 'map of local ideas and beliefs about: life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or warfare.' These aspirations manifest in 'more densely

local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue.' He argues that we are ultimately blinded to the 'higher-order normative contexts' by 'specific wants and choices: for this piece of land or that, for marriage connection or another one, for this job in the bureaucracy as opposed to that job overseas, for this pair of shoes over that pair of trousers' (187-88). It is in these lower-order decisions of everyday life where class can have profound felt effects. I consider how my participants compose what might be referred to as good enough life through this lower-order decision-making.

A final question arises regarding the *relationship between* uncertainty and wellbeing. Does sustaining wellbeing help negotiate uncertainty and/or does uncertainty have a role in wellbeing? Marja-Liisa Honksalo's (2009) ethnography of heart disease in Finland points out that for her participants, not knowing when illness and death will come is a matter of everyday life. Uncertainty was thus not seen as suffering, but 'was considered an essential tissue of human life' (65). She found her informants 'embracing contingency instead of attempting to control it.' By embracing uncertainty, people found small ways to have agency. 'People's ways of conceptualizing a good death,' for example, 'provides a glimpse into what I would like to call "engaging or enabling uncertainty" (65). In Chapter Five I explore how embracing uncertainty in the home space through the ambiguity of atmosphere can have a positive effect on the body's ability to negotiate greater uncertainties confronted in the world, and potentially contribute to household wellbeing.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE HOME

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC chapters of thesis cover four main components of the home:

the material home, the narrative home, the atmospheric home, and the porous or multi-scalar home. While these four approaches mirror trends in home-based fieldwork (discussed below) they are chosen primarily for how they help explore and analyse themes relating to uncertainty and wellbeing in this specific context.

First, my methodological approach to home-based fieldwork is grounded in material culture approaches to the home (D. Miller 2001; D. Miller 2008; Daniels 2010). Attention was paid to the routinisations of daily life, particularly habits of storing, cleaning, cooking, decorating (Shove 2003; Daniels 2010) and to atmosphere, such as lighting, smells, and sounds, which help the researcher explore affective experience of space and the in-betweenness of subject and object (Daniels 2015; Bille et al. 2015). I also paid heed to the contestation and compromise evident during periods of upheaval, change, or transition (Garvey 2001; Reimer and Leslie 2004).

The material culture approach to the home is marked by Pierre Bourdieu's (1970) study of the Kabyle house, which is considered 'pivotal' in launching an emphasis on everyday practice in the study of the home (Miller 2001). His study lay the groundwork for his reflections on the notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1970; Bourdieu 1977). In defining habitus in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu suggests that everyday improvisations are regulated by a system of cognitive and social structures, rooted in history, that bind everyday practice within normative behaviours; while historically rooted, the habitus concurrently adjusts to the various potentialities offered in a given situation. He writes that 'each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning' (Bourdieu 1977:79). As such, the seemingly banal practices of the everyday become a space through which the anthropologist can observe and articulate culture. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu reflects

that taste is also enacted within the habitus, for the habitus has 'the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these products' (Bourdieu 1979:166).

An emphasis on practice highlights dialectical relationship between persons and things; it "decentres' mind, texts and conversation' and shifts 'bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary' (Reckwitz, 2002: 259). Building on Bourdieu, Elizabeth Shove et al. (2007) relay that practice 'emphasize[s] tacit and unconscious forms of knowledge and experience through which shared ways of understanding and being in the world are established' (12). The 'ordinary habits' and 'back stage practices of the home' (Shove 2003) thus become vital in methodologically attending to what is not being verbally articulated. Objects are core to the methodological study of practice: they are part of the reproduction of culture, giving visual and material form to collective constructions of meaning (Shove 2003; M Douglas and C. Isherwood 1979). Things can 'implicitly condition human actors' (Bourdieu 1977); as Daniel Miller (D. Miller 2005) points out, many objects—working together in the everyday—have power in our lives because they blend into the background: 'the less aware we are of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behaviour, without being open to challenge' (5). Chapter three addresses a number of roles that objects play in everyday life in relation to ontological insecurity, a facet of uncertainty.

Second, the focus on uncertainty and wellbeing necessitates revisiting the function of narratives in the home. Both ethnographies of uncertainty and wellbeing describe the necessity to understand current situations in terms of the life-course. Cooper and Pratten (2015) note that 'for ethnography to do justice to the experience and productivity of living in

uncertain times, it must methodologically draw heavily on narrative and individual biography' (13). This is in part because of the power of narratives to sustain agency when things are out of one's control, but also to 'account for the contingencies of life trajectories' (13) that emerge from biographies. The narrative also accounts for the 'unfolding of intention and consequence'—imagined futures and potential pasts—which accompany lives (Whyte 2005). Gardner (2015) has also relied on life stories when researching happiness amongst migrants, where projections of happiness often do not unfold as anticipated. In recognising that her interlocutor's responses are 'highly subjective and ever changing' (197), Gardner sheds light on the fact that when it comes to wellbeing, ethnographers cannot expect to gain direct answers, as the future is not known to either the researcher or the participants. However, as these reflections on uncertainty and wellbeing suggest, the life story gives perspective on the unfolding.

Past accounts of narratives in anthropology, popular in the 1990s, offer some insight into how narratives address uncertainty and wellbeing. For instance, the formation of narratives help answer the problem of the post-modern subjectivity, which Nikolas Rose (1996) describes as 'fragmented, multiple, contradictory' and constantly subject to intensive reflexivity 'tormented by uncertainty and doubt' (9). They offered a means to compose a fractured sense of self, perhaps brought on by disparate experiences of being-in-the-world (Ochs and Capps 1996). In the US context, the formation of self-narratives are also recognised to be a part of 'expressive individualism' interlaced with the creation of community and 'lifestyle enclaves,' where individuals can find small communities, including a romantic love partnership or household, that resonate with their preferred individual lifestyle (Bellah et al. 1985).

I draw a parallel between narratives in the homes studied and classic literature on illness narratives (Good 1994; Kleinman 1988; Mattingly 1994). Illness, especially chronic illness, is an uncertain experience which individuals can make sense of and legitimate through forming narratives (Kleinman 1988). The chronically ill patient must face large existential questions—life and death, or pleasure and pain—over time (Kleinman 1988); so too must the individual facing prolonged or repeated uncertainty. Narrative emplotment—or the plotting of an experience into a narrative structure—can help the individual process illness, 'where feelings of fragmentation and alienation are overcome and replaced by congruence and direction' (Steffen, 1997:105). As a culturally and socially understood narrative framework, emplotting illness or uncertainty into a narrative is productive in helping people come to terms with the unknown. Further, both illness and uncertainty are experiences negotiated in context, between actors and the changing environment.

Cheryl Mattingly's long-term fieldwork with African American families caring for children with disabilities addresses similar concerns as this thesis and exemplifies an ethnographic approach where narrative and everyday practice overlap (Mattingly 2014b; Mattingly 2013; Mattingly 2014a). While her framework considers first-person virtue ethics and moral projects, ethnographically she attends to the everyday life of households during periods of uncertainty and hardship. Her attention to 'the good life' and 'care for the intimate other' also offers insight into wellbeing in the US, albeit in a different population. She explores the narrative reconstruction of morality through daily routines and practices of care, writing that: 'the local morality of the household […] is manifested most vividly, concretely and compellingly in the creation and recreation of domestic routines' (Mattingly 2013). She refers to various spaces of everyday life—which extend from the home—as

'moral laboratories' where families undergo ethical quandaries and moral meaning making. One account of familial rupture describes a 'less verbal form of dialogue, one that is rooted in everyday practices of care' as she explores a grandmother's 'crafting and recrafting of everyday home routines in response to the changing circumstances of their lives together' (Mattingly, 2014a:59). While she emphasises this as a part of 'moral becoming,' I am interested in how selves are made and remade in relation to encounters with 'everyday uncertainty.'[10]

As a third point, uncertainty and wellbeing are also entangled in the in-betweenness of the everyday. They are not wholly present or absent, and instead often inhabit an affective space between subjects, objects or environments, and actions or circumstance; 'the co-presence' of these elements, which are consistently moving, are a part of the production of space (Sørensen, 2015: 66). Here I draw on anthropological accounts of atmosphere in the home, which have been developed to attend to the inherent ambiguities and mutability of space (Larkin 2013; Bille et al. 2015). Both atmosphere and infrastructure inhabit spaces of 'in-betweenness,' (Bille et al., 2015). Infrastructures—which can be technological, biological, social, and financial—describe things and the relationship between them (Larkin 2013). While infrastructures themselves are nothing new, a focus on infrastructure arose in part from a 'spatial' turn in anthropology, which responded to theories that privileged the built environment and did not attend to urban 'flows:' labour, goods, energy, water, electricity, and so on (Low 2014). The term 'atmosphere' has been used in accounts of domestic space to address the 'in-betweenness' of subject and object, experience and environment, and the relationship between materiality, subjectivity, and affect (Bille et al., 2015). Homemakers,

[10] This thesis ultimately seeks to contribute to and problematise anthropologies of uncertainty rather than anthropologies of ethics.

architects and designers, and city planners have strived to intentionally create these felt experiences, or 'ambiences' (Thibaud 2015). In the home, this can include décor or lighting that adds to senses of 'cosiness' or 'warmth' (Olesen 2010; Gullestad 1984).

Focusing on light in Bedouin homes, Bille (2017) argues that 'atmospheres are the medium through which things present themselves to people and through which people comprehend and attune to the world' (43). He describes the engagement of 'half-things' and things and affect: 'with a focus on light and atmospheres, we are on the one hand dealing with a phenomenon where half-things (sun and sky) and things (light bulb and window) physically affect other objects by casting shadows or a particular light. Yet we are also dealing with the affective mode of presence such relationships shape' (41-41) While he focuses on light, he notes that other aspects shape atmospheres, such as scents and sounds, many of which have culturally specific meanings and functions that the ethnography must attune to overtime.

Daniels' (2015) attention to the 'everyday, lived experience of the atmosphere inside the home' (48) exhibits the relational quality of atmosphere. She considers the 'back-stage bodily activities, such as co-sleeping and co-bathing, which generate 'social heat' and cultivate strong feelings of family solidarity and security' (48). While these experiences can be difficult to study, Daniels' long-term fieldwork inside Japanese homes allowed her to note discrepancies between the ideal atmosphere and the daily realities of intimate familial living. She found that while intimate sociality is important, a balance 'between dependence and autonomy' (48) is needed: 'the lived experience of intimate atmospheres is shaped within the dynamic interplay between the involvement in, and detachment from, sociality' (54). She describes the generation of 'heat' in the home, particularly bodily heat, as facilitating these

intimate atmospheres.

Fourth, the home is also recognised as a porous and multi-scalar entity (Steiner and Veel 2017; Brickell 2016; Blunt and Dowling 2006). As numerous anthropologists have attested to through fieldwork, the boundaries of the home dwelling are negotiated. A recent special issue of *Home Cultures* considers 'the porous and permeable nature of the walls of the home and investigate instances in which the public world, for example, urban institutions and collective myths, enter, and co-define the home—and vice versa (Steiner and Veel 2017:2). This permeability is highlighted in the flows of goods and material from the outside world into the home, such as through the internet and other media or household provisions (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992). Writing of technological 'gadgets' in the home and their use by the elderly, Ian Ewart and Rachael Luck (2012) draw attention to technology's 'ability to allow us to reconfigure our relations with the world, to incorporate the worlds we see through them, transcending the interior and providing access to a different kind of exterior' (13). For the elderly (and others), certain technologies become what Ewart and Luck call 'portal objects' to the outside world. People too are a part of everyday movements which take them between home and work, school, institutions, nature, and other homes (Nippert-Eng 2010). Walls themselves can also be 'mediating devices that perform culturally specific connecting procedures' (Steiner and Veel 2017:2), such as the use of green-tinted windows in Bedouin homes reminding inhabitants of the presence of god (Bille 2017).

Geographers have also highlighted the home as a 'multi-scalar entity,' which is part of the 'critical geography of the home' (Brickell 2016; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Katherine Brickell describes how Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling developed the term 'critical geographies of the home' 'to understand the politics of home reflected in [current] events

[…] from Hurricane Katrina and the Indian Ocean tsunami, to the domestication of the war on terror in the United States'. Through their work, Brickell (2016) recognises that 'the home is a vital space for understanding the micro-geographies of social and spatial uncertainty which influence, and are influenced by, wider structural forces of unhomeliness, alienation, and homelessness' (227). She calls for further critical engagement with the home.

These four components constitute my approach to the home and are woven throughout the thesis. However, Chapters Three through Five focus on material, narrative, and atmosphere in turn, with Chapter Six considering what facets of greater social, economic and political constructs emerge under the framework of everyday uncertainty and wellbeing. In doing so, I describe participant reflections on the city, nation, and globe, drawing attention to the ambivalence and ambiguity of place-based identity.

NEW AMERICAN FUTURES

IN THIS THESIS, I discuss the making of futures for two reasons: first, the notion of future is entangled in uncertainty (as in, having an unknown outcome) and wellbeing as an on-going, futures-oriented pursuit. I also discuss futures-making as a part of the ethnographic context in Providence County. Potential was a word that frequently came up amongst my participants, which resonated with the ideology of 'hope' that marks optimistic thinking within the state of Rhode Island. These are themes I revisit in Chapter Six, where they can be adequately embedded in my ethnographic findings. I regard their envisionings as part of their enactment of creative responses to uncertainty in the home and the city at large.

Futures-making is of recent interest to some anthropologists, who are aware of its

neglect under current trends that focus on the everyday (Salazar et al. 2017). Work on futures engages directly with uncertainty—in the sense that the future, particularly the ecological future, is fearfully anticipated and ultimately unknown; the future is 'a surprise that brings or heralds something new' (B. Anderson and Adey 2012:1529). Engaging the future, particularly through ethnographic practices, involves attending to the complex relationship between the future and the unfolding present; in this regard, it is not just about how people imagine the future, but with how people engage with the contingencies inherent in everyday life (Salazar et al. 2017). Futures are 'folded into a dynamic present,' made and remade 'alongside and through a range of other entities' (B. Anderson and Adey 2012: 1535).

While debates between the overlap of the anthropology of time and the emerging anthropology of futures are beyond the scope of this thesis, some discussion of temporality is needed. Discussions of temporality occur throughout the thesis, such as how participants integrate the past into their lives or prepare for future possibilities. Nancy Munn (1992) considers time as both inescapable and pervasive, penetrating 'all aspects of social experience and practice.' The 'spaces people live in are "saturated" with varied temporal meanings, including different kinds of pasts (some of which may be contested)' (114). Everyday practices involve ongoing (future-oriented) activities, where people can strategically engage with the past and future through their current, embodied encounters with space (Munn 1992; Bourdieu 1977). As Munn (1992) reflects, 'in any given instance, particular temporal dimensions may be foci of attention or only tacitly known. Either way, these dimensions are lived or apprehended concretely via the various meaningful connectivities among persons, objects, and space continually being made in and through the everyday world' (116). Of course, perceptions and experiences of time are socially and culturally embedded (Munn

1992). My own participants are embedded in Western notions of linear time, where the present is narrated in terms of the past and the future and counted via digital technology, particularly smart phones, watches, and digital calendars. This is not to say that alternative awarenesses of time are not explored, embodied, or articulated, but to say that participants are ultimately caught within a culture that sees time as part of a techno-economic progression towards the future.

Recently, some have called for anthropologists to move beyond contextual time to directly engage in the making of futures themselves, drawing ethnographic insights into technology and design (Salazar et al. 2017). The idea of making futures engages with notions of imagination, possibility, and improvisations, discussed at length in this thesis. Here I return again to Ingold and Hallam's (2007) notion of creativity and improvisation, which emerges as part of futures-making in the everyday. Vincent Crapanzano (Crapanzano 2003) similarly discusses imagination and creativity as a process, recognising that concrete visions of the future—or 'imaginative horizons'—can disguise other possibilities: 'when a horizon and whatever lies beyond it are given articulate form, they freeze our view of the reality that immediately confronts us' (2). Later in this thesis I address how creatively engaging with uncertainty helps some participants sustain the experience of possibility and encourages wellbeing. Their imaginative horizons maintain flexibility, with the capability of adapting to change narrated into their sense of the unfolding present. This ongoing possibility for change, both good and bad, forms the foundations of their 'humble aspirations.'

Appadurai (2013) sheds lights into how integrating futures-making into everyday practice is vital for understanding the potential of culture, including its possible makings and re-makings, and for understanding who has access to this imagining. He highlights how the

capacity to aspire—to make the future—is something that the structures of economy prevent the poor from fully participating in. Those who are better off are 'more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs' (188). While 'the poor' do have some pathways available to them, Appadurai describes them as 'rigid' and 'less supple.' The capacity to aspire 'thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation' (189). Material security, this suggests, offers capacities beyond basic survival that are continuously reintegrated into the habitus of the middle class.

Looking Forward

THE EVERYDAY lives of the households herein shed light on what everyday uncertainty is for them, their pursuits of wellbeing within life's unexpected turns, and how they situate themselves within the greater environments in which they live. In the next chapter I attend to this larger context, providing insight into some of the cultural influences that emerge throughout the thesis. I argue throughout the subsequent chapters that uncertainty is negotiated and wellbeing articulated through three legs of the everyday: the self, social others, and the material world in which we exist. The perceived quality of these three relationships affects the household's ability to negotiate uncertainty and sustain wellbeing. I will conclude this thesis by drawing my ethnographic accounts together to argue that the new American futures created in this liberal, Northeast enclave are sustained by the everyday practices that both assuage uncertainty and inspire 'humble aspirations.'

Chapter Two - Ethnographic Context

INTRODUCTION

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. –*The American Declaration of Independence, 1776*

THIS SECTION visits the themes of the thesis, namely uncertainty and wellbeing, in the context of the continuous making of America, both in the past and future. As noted above, while uncertainty is a theoretical overlay to the thesis and the word was rarely used as a marker or category of experience, participants often spoke of their unknown futures, imbued with both anxieties and possibilities of what a changing America might bring. Their future imaginings are embedded in a legacy of capitalism and the current demands of neoliberal flexibility. This legacy is addressed below, with particularly concentration on historicising neoliberalism in New England identity. Understanding this context sheds light on some of the beliefs of the participants herein.

I also consider wellbeing as a contemporary form of the American pursuit of happiness, one in which the holistic health of the body and mind are held in high regard. As a pursuit, wellbeing is futures-oriented, ultimately remaining a project that is never quite finished. In this section I address an on going tension between American individualism and the pursuit of wellbeing, a tension that emerges throughout this ethnography.

SITUATING THIS ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

THIS ETHNOGRAPHY is primarily situated within cross-culturally accounts of domesticity, uncertainty and wellbeing, with heavy influence from a European legacy of anthropologies of the home (D. Miller 2001; Daniels 2010; Gullestad 1984; Munro and Madigan 1999). However, as study of a US population, this ethnography can also be situated amongst ethnographies of 'American' culture today. I use the word 'America' to differentiate the socio-cultural identity of the US from its identity as a nation (the United States of America), which mirrors how these two elements are differentiated in context: the US is a nation, a government, and a geographical place, whereas 'America' is an elusive cultural identity (with participant sentiments to be elaborated in Chapter Six). Also, in context, US citizens are referred to as 'Americans' and so this language is adopted.

In US social anthropology and sociology, there has been a tendency in the past decades to focus on concerns that are inspired by both social justice and critical anthropology (for instance marginalised groups, the inner city, drug abusers, poverty, migration, racism, and class). My own ethnography feels out of place amongst these accounts of American life: it looks at a mostly white, liberal, middle class selection of households that seem insignificant in comparison. And yet, the banal routines and everyday encounters of the households studied shed light on a type of community that has considerable cultural capital: highly-educated, 'creatives,' entrepreneurs, wellness professionals, and social justice workers. While individually my participants have little economic power, much power resides in how the urban, educated middle class envisions of the future of America.

Various anthropologists have attended to the middle class in domestic constructs, including Sherry Ortner (2003), Rachel Heiman (2015) and Setha Low (2003). Heiman's ethnography focuses on a New Jersey suburb in the 1990s, a place where social mobility was a dominant theme in everyday life. She highlights what she calls 'rugged entitlement' – a drive towards upward class mobility that emerged in those who 'struggled' to make that the suburban dream a reality 'with an anxious sense that they must vigilantly pursue their own interests to maintain and further their class position' (22). As the ethnography was published in 2015, Heiman considers the changes that the economic crash of 2008 sparked, when suddenly the fear of lay-offs, home loss, and ultimately falling downwards on the economic ladder became a real concern for many suburban families. Sherry Ortner's (2003) ethnography *New Jersey Dreaming* also describes upwards social mobility in New Jersey, following her High School class of 1958 many years later. Ortner treats class as something similar to the habitus, but departs from Bourdieu and others 'in emphasising the degree to which the imagination, at both the level of the individual and the level of public culture, can always exceed the limits of any given position' (13). For Ortner, class becomes a project, 'as something that is always being made or kept or defended, feared or desired' (14). Low's (2003; Low 2010) ethnography of a gated community reflects the 'desires for safety, security, community, and "niceness"' (2010:31) that stem out of the fear of 'others' and of crime. While these communities might assuage fears of crime, the desires for community are not necessarily realised in everyday life.

While these texts are cited elsewhere in this thesis, it is worth mentioning that the majority of my participants differ from those of ethnographies in two key ways. One, a significant number of my participants resist the ethics of fear of the 'other' that mark Low's

population; however, while gated communities do not exist in this sample, embodied mechanisms of separation, or the non-architectural 'mechanisms of "gating"' (Heiman, 2015:32) do exist and are consider in Chapters Three and Five. Two, upwards economic mobility is not an overwhelming aspiration, which could be, as Heiman notes, an effect of the 2008 economic downturn or it could suggest a concurrent, different way of middle class living, similar to Ortner's observation that some people opted out of the 'mobility game' (214). Ortner reports that 'happiness' or 'satisfaction' was a marker of success that her participants reported from 'across the economic spectrum' (225). "'Being happy with who you are or what you have'" (225) was a common type of response. 'It is not that money doesn't matter; the key is that it alone cannot make one "happy"' (227). Thus, for Ortner, comfort in everyday life emerged as a marker of lower-capital happiness.

The question of what constitutes 'Americanness' is hardest to address, and I have relied heavily on several social science texts, popular accounts, and philosophical texts. The question of 'Americanness' emerges in Chapter Six, in tandem with local and global identities, when I explore the home as a multi-scalar entity (Blunt and Dowling 2006). However, certain elements of American culture emerge as I build towards an argument about new American futures in the home. While Chapters Three through Six draw out aspects from fieldwork that relate to Americanness, herein I would like to forefront some underlying insights into what constitutes 'America.'

I prefer Anna Tsing's (2015) account of Americanness in her ethnography, *The Mushroom at the End of the World.* Her encounters with mushroom pickers in Oregon elucidate a variety of ways people exist within and against capitalism and the ways in which certain American values are re-evaluated and transformed in context. Writing of US citizenship,

Tsing reflects:

> 'A wild new cosmopolitanism has inflected what it means to be an American: a jostling of unassimilated fragments of cultural agendas and political causes from around the world […] American precarity—living in ruins—is in this unstructured multiplicity, this uncongealed confusion. No longer a melting pot, we live with unrecognizable others' (98).

Her insight is somewhat echoed in ethnographic accounts of the insecurity of America, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. Gusterson and Besteman, in considering 'earlier attempts by social scientists to characterize the zeitgeist of American society' (13), see 'insecurity' as the current 'dominant theme in American culture,' influenced by US military and economic policy within 'the international system' and the neoliberal workplace. Their analysis is timely, published soon after the economic crash of 2008 and during the 'war on terror.' Tsing's account of Americanness, on the other hand, situates the 'uncongealed confusion' of the times within a longer legacy of capitalism, immigration, and ecology that makes up America, which is ultimately an 'assemblage—an open-ended entanglement of ways of being' (83) that stretches far beyond its national borders.

The Spirits of Capitalism

NEOLIBERALISM is also relevant to ethnographies of the US context. While rooted in earlier liberal ideologies about the usefulness of individual utility and the free-market, the neoliberal turn is marked by changes to US, British, and global capitalism in the 1980s, including 'a concrete set of public policies' focusing on 'deregulation (of the economy); liberalisation (of trade and industry); and privatisation (of state-owned enterprises)' (Steger and Roy 2010:14). Neoliberalism is also a form of governmentality (Foucault 1978) that

draws particular attention to individual freedoms. As David Harvey (2005) highlights, 'the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking' (7). Neoliberalism appears all encompassing, and we can find it almost everywhere we look. However, in its academic trendiness, some fail to attend to neoliberalism's more dominant legacy, capitalism, and to the uniquely situated social and historical legacies of place.

While the US is entrenched in neoliberal economics, politics, and society today, this should not blind us to a long legacy of capitalism, as articulated in Max Weber's (1905) account of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (a text particularly relevant for the New England context of this ethnography, to be referenced again). In discussing the influence of Luther on the protestant ethic, Weber recognised that there was a 'stronger and stronger emphasis on the providential element' (39) of the individual being directly within God's divine power, leading to an 'absolute acceptance of things as they were' and the Puritan's 'serious attention to this world' (44). He writes: 'The individual should remain once and for all in the station and calling in which God had placed him, and should restrain his worldly activity within the limits imposed by his established station in life' (39). Weber then describes how the Puritan concept of providence differed from the Lutheran in emphasising the 'methodical character of worldly asceticism' instead of 'acceptance of the lot which God has irretrievably assigned to man.' Within the Puritan ethic, Weber argues, is a worldly calling centred on the pleasures of work, so that God's favour is established through material success. This ethic, he argues, underlies the capitalist spirit even as religion fell away.[11]

The concurrent engagement in, rejection of, and reform of capitalism is evident

[11] Weber (1905) also cites 'complaints of a peculiarly calculating sort of profit-seeking in New England, as distinguished from other parts of America, as early as 1692.'

throughout much of the history of liberal thinking and rise in capitalist economics. Capitalism is equally entwined with religion and morality for much of its history. Liberal economic theory of the 18th century was grounded in a sense of moral obligation to the community (A. Smith 1759). As psychiatrist and biobehavioural scientist Peter Whybrow (2005) reflects:

> [I]n Smith's opinion, it was the dynamic balance between healthy ambition and individual desire and an individual's empathetic, observing conscience—what Smith referred to as the "impartial spectator"—that provided the prescription for positive social change in a free-market economy, ensuring a stable civil order and an equitable distribution of wealth. (35)

The ethical counterpart to free market liberalism has periodically been recalled in light of its perceived absence from mainstream capitalism. I consider the transcendental movement as an example, particular because of its rootedness in 'old New England stock' (Buell 2016). During the considerable economic precarity that accompanied the 19th century transition (1815-1860) from a largely agrarian, home-based economy to a market-based structure, transcendentalists rejected the rising materialism and cruelty of the era (Gougeon 2010) as well as the Lockean psychology that accompanied liberal American Unitarianism, where 'God and his laws are apprehended by rational reflection,' turning instead to intuition and 'higher Reason' (Buell 2016:4-5). American literature scholar Len Gougeon (2010) writes that while transcendentalists were for the most part connected to the capitalist economy of the era, they were not 'comfortable with the ruthless excesses of the economy, and each sought to alter it in ways that would make it more humane and conducive to the dignity and well-being of all people, especially the working class' (137). Core to transcendentalism was a focus on the 'inner light' of the self or the individual's connection to God, a return to 'self-reliance,' nature, and contemplation (Buell 2016). These ways of being are also evident in the self-spiritualties of the Western 'the New Age movement' (Heelas 1996) which accompanies

20th century discontent with modernity and late capitalism. While New Age practices and beliefs vary, Paul Heelas (1996) suggests that these practices have core similarities—such as the importance of the self/individual exploration of the divine—marking a 'radical break with the modern condition' (3).[12]

What emerges is a tension between the individual and the community, where the good of the whole is not necessarily forsaken in individual pursuits of both economic capital and spiritual wellbeing. While this tension is not limited to New England, I draw on New England history to situate the community studied. The concurrent participation in and rejection of mainstream politics, economics and spirituality is evident in the founding of Providence itself, which furthered the secular separation of church and state, rejecting the ways of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The legacies of freedom and fairness that inspired Rhode Island's founding are evoked in the sense that entrepreneurship should be small scale and that it should benefit the community and environment.

While these ethics do not always play out in practice, I show in Chapter Six how the desire to be both self-reliant and a contributing member of the community runs strong. While I have made efforts to situate my participants in longer legacies of US politics, economics, and ethics, I also recognise that the world in which they live is embedded in global, late capitalist structures. They thus partake in capitalist consumption, which is in many ways attached to their construction of the good life.

Small business entrepreneurship is particularly resonant. However, I consider this as partially a result of neoliberal precarity, where participants are both forced to and want to manage their own livelihoods. The concepts of 'freedom' and 'happiness' are deeply related

[12] The Northeast and other parts of the US have small economies that capitalise on and are sustained by New Age beliefs.

to the type of small-scale entrepreneurship that emerges in Providence. Entrepreneurs, private counsellors or teachers, and independent contractors, were present in 8 of the 18 households. While entrepreneurship is rife with American values of economic self-making and hard work, the Providencian entrepreneurial ethic revolves around a desire for simplicity, cooperative communities, and lifestyles that foster wellbeing. Even those 'confined' to salaried 9-5 jobs reflected that they benefited from the spirit in Providence, enjoying buying from small businesses and consuming the arts. Laced within this is the general sense that happiness and freedom are related: freedom of choice, freedom to follow 'labours of love,' but carefully bounded within middle class security. Many participants articulate the desire to 'create' their own lives, a notion that reflects a similar longing for both financial security and happiness that Ortner (2003) sees in the class of 1958. This security often came in the form of marriage, where one partner had a reliable source of income, or a steady part-time job.

These worlds too are haunted by capitalism, but the desire that emerges is not one of total removal from capitalism, but rather its supposed 're-creation.' Anna Tsing (2015) recognises how different groups envision and create 'freedom' can look resolutely unfamiliar from 'the freedom imagined by economists, who use that term to talk about the regularities of individual rational choice' (76). Reflecting on mushroom buying practices in Oregon, she sees freedom emerging 'from open-ended cultural interplay, full of potential conflict and misunderstanding' (76) that 'is not "labor" but is haunted by labor' (79). She articulates mushroom picking as a lifestyle that rejects capitalist labour, but which is followed by capitalism's 'ghosts':

> Conjuring a future full of pasts, a ghost-ridden freedom is both a way to move on and a way to remember. In its fever, picking escapes the separation of persons and

> things so dear to industrial production. The mushrooms are not yet alien commodities; they are effects of the pickers freedom. Yet this scene only exists because the two-sided experience has purchase in a strange sort of commerce. Buyers translate freedom trophies into trade through dramatic performances of "free market competition." Thus market freedom enters freedom's jumble, making the holding in abeyance of concentrated power, labor, property, and the alienation seem strong and effective. (80)

The re-envisioning of capitalism imagined herein is not a total rejection; it rather echoes the visions of self-reliance, return to the land, and communal spirituality that is layered in the bedrock of New England. The ghosts—the 'spirits' of capitalism—are different from those of Tsing's Oregon woodlands, but they too reject the 'separation of persons and things so dear to capitalist production' and are encapsulated by a wider global marketplace. Freedom emerges as a quality which people both seek and are forced to participate in.

The Pursuit of Wellbeing in an Individualist Society: Self-development, 'feeling-speak,' and alternative therapeutics

IN THEIR CLASSIC account of American culture, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Robert Bellah et al. (1985) call freedom the 'most resonate, deeply held American value' (23) which is articulated in political, economic, and personal life. This notion of freedom is deeply entangled in individual sovereignty, where the self is seen as the maker of his or her own future, and the rugged individualism and self-sufficiency of frontier romanticism. The 'pursuit of happiness' lies as a somewhat incongruent partner: individual sovereignty, it turns out, is at odds with both individual and collective happiness. Happiness is considered a *natural right* in the US Declaration of Independence, written in 1776: 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.' In writing of the American desire for more, Whybrow (2005) reflects:

> In 1776 nobody really understood what "the pursuit of happiness" really meant, nor do we today, but the metaphor has always been clear: in the American temperament there lives a restless desire to achieve some ill-defined perfection, and toward that end, the pursuit of self-interest, as Adam Smith first championed, is a valued virtue. (47)

His insights are bolstered under the neoliberal turn, where, as Emily Martin (2007) describes, the 'individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure in a high-stakes and ever-changing set of arenas' (41), including one's own 'emotional' stability.[13] Yet, the *individual* pursuit of both sovereignty and happiness presents what some have considered a uniquely American problem: isolation (Bellah et al. 1985; de Tocqueville 1835).

Bellah et al. argue that America has long been haunted by an irreconcilable relationship between the desire for autonomous selves and the desire for community—once captured in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835). Children are reared to be independent and self-reliant and as adults are encouraged to determine their own spiritual path, 'make something' of their selves through work, and find romantic love, 'the quintessential form of expressive individualism' (73). Following these roles requires an adaptive, autonomous self who must sometimes forego family and community to pursue individualistic happiness. Bellah et al. point out that the pursuit of self-fulfilment can create an internal conflict where individuals find their selves 'suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation' (6). Other ethnographies have described this sense of aloneness sparked by both the desire for both independence and community in the US context (Putnam 2000; Low 2010). Yet, Bellah et al. share a compelling observation: while the Americans they introduce in the beginning of their book share a similar 'moral discourse' of individualism, 'they have

[13] Emily Martin notes that constructions of the 'emotional self' are heavily embedded in American beliefs about the sovereign self in part because 'a person's emotions constitute his or her sense of uniqueness because they represent a kind of inner truth about the self' (45).

difficulty articulating the richness of their commitments. In the language they use, their lives sound more isolated and arbitrary than, as we have observed them, they actually are' (21).

This raises the question of the way that people speak in the US; their individualist discourses sometimes don't account for the realities of everyday, community life. Ortner (2003) reflects on the possibility that the 'happiness' her participants value is just a type of 'therapy-speak.' On the one hand, she writes: 'People have been encouraged by advertising, schooling-ideology, and other things to translate social realities into personal feeling-states, and thus to misrecognise their own lack of privilege and its sources […] one can hear people more or less consciously adjusting or adapting to a lower level of financial success than they may have hoped for or imagined themselves achieving earlier in life' (232). On the other hand, she recognises that with all their 'feeling talk,' her participants 'emphasize the importance of relationships – with spouses, friends, and children' (233) and that there is a genuine 'everyday form' of critique 'of the single-minded pursuit of money' (234) that does not account for interpersonal happiness.

My ethnographic encounters reflect the same type of 'feeling speak' around discourses of wellbeing. The selves encountered herein are often highly reflexive, and articulate about their thoughts, relationships, and subjective experiences. Many have been through therapy and several are counsellors of some sort themselves. Therapy is discussed openly—as the above quotes from interviews attest, it is considered a normal practice when things are going wrong, to fix familial relationships, and for some it becomes a normative part of life over a considerable amount of time. Several participants discussed therapy as related to their sense of wellbeing over time, or as a means to deal with difficult changes in life. Bellah et al. (1985) considered 'the therapist' one of several 'representative characters'

that are symbolic of American ways of life. They write: 'the therapist is a specialist in mobilizing resources for effective action […] the resources are largely internal to the individual and the measure of effectiveness is the elusive criterion of personal satisfaction' (47). Nikolas Rose (1996; 1992) has written extensively on 'the therapeutic' as a project of everyday self making, recognising that 'therapeutics has psychologized the mundane. Everyday life, from debt, through house purchase, childbirth, marriage and divorce is transformed into "life events", remediable problems of coping and adjustment' (Rose 1992:151). In the present ethnography, these therapeutic legacies come to the fore through verbalised accounts and discussion around therapeutic practices. What is less articulated are the ways in which everyday life is embedded in a psychologised language about subjective experiences and interpersonal relationships.

My embodied encounters as a researcher eventually alerted me to the sense that unwanted subjective experiences like sadness, anger, hurt or frustration were rarely palpable in my presence; rather, they were articulated through verbal processing. This gave the illusion of openness, while actual moments of upset were kept private. I became aware of this through one participant whose fatigue, sadness, and frustration I could see and feel when I spent time with her. She once reflected that a friend was *too up in his head, and not in his body*, drawing attention to the fact that she was frustrated by this way of being. The comment struck me both because it gave insight into her own sense of self—as someone who was 'embodied' in her experience—and because it pointed to the legacy of the Cartesian mind-body divides that emerge in everyday practice in the household. The body was both rejected as a source of knowledge by some and, in response to this rejection, used as a tool of awareness by others. This conflict around the so-called rational-self and emotional-body has

a long legacy (S. Williams 2001). Even Descartes, despite rationalising a distinction between mind and body, was conflicted by the unconscious (Bordo 1999). This participant exhibited an awareness of this divide, without giving it a name. She sought an integration that was referred to as 'heart practice,' governed by what she might call an intuitive awareness of the self in the world. Reflexivity thus took on different forms, from the 'intellectual technology' of therapeutics (Rose 1996:10) to the intuitive awareness of the sensing body, which has roots in 'alternative' therapies, yoga practice, and other methods of 'self-awareness.' It is vital to note, however, that these forms do not exist on a continuum between households. Rather, they appear incongruently in the same households over periods of time, pointing to an overall habitus that encourages self-exploration but is mediated by firmly rooted cultural beliefs about 'emotion,' individual personhood, and collective wellbeing.

Verbalised accounts of self-discovery and self-cultivation emerge frequently throughout this thesis, particularly when it comes to what constitutes the formation of wellbeing over time. For the most part, these accounts reflect the autonomous, sovereign self that so often follows American individualism (N. Rose 1996; Bellah et al. 1985). However, my ethnography raises a point of contention around individual sovereignty, pointing to the entangled ways in which people come to know themselves and intimate others. While explicit self-improvement tools are used, such as therapy, the self is transformed through more intimate and embodied transformation, which under Michel Foucault's terms of 'technologies of the self' '…permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault 1994:225).

Further, as Cheryl Mattingly, Veena Das, and others have recognised, meaning-making and care co-emerge as individuals try to make sense of changing worlds in the company of others (Mattingly 2014a; Das 2010).

IN CLOSING, I want to draw attention to the ambivalence through which ideological concepts are approached in the everyday, even in the ways that people learn to speak (Schut and Grassiani 2017; Walker and Kavedžija 2015). Ambivalence points to how ontological experiences of the abstract are often incongruent with the imagined ideal or dominant ideological understanding. For Gardner (2015), happiness does not emerge as a state of being in the everyday lives of Bangladeshi migrants in London, but "'the promise of happiness" helps order peoples' relationships to places and their movements across the world' (200). She highlights how subjective happiness is often forsaken in favour of the collective wellbeing of the group in the future. Like certainty, freedom is often only recognised in its absence, or what it means to be un-free (Schut and Grassiani 2017). Thijs Schut and Erella Grassiani (2017) reflect that freedom 'is not an objective state "out there." Instead, freedom can be seen as an experience, a subjective state, and it should therefore be investigated as such' (8). These reflections inform my approach to American ideological constructs in the home.

In the following section, I begin to narrow my contextual framing further by describing Rhode Island, Providence County, and the city of Providence, which has been described as a 'Renaissance' city and an arts and culture capital. I introduce within this context the households studied as a constructed 'community.'

SITUATING PROVIDENCE

Rhode Island, Providence County, and the City of Providence: the Basics

THIS RESEARCH took place in Providence County, Rhode Island, in the Northeastern United States. Officially named *The State of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations*, Rhode Island is the smallest US state by area and one of the most densely populated states, with a population around one million in 2015 ("US Census Bureau" 2010). Rhode Island is politically 'solid democrat' (Jones 2015) and is a part of the New England region of the US (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island). See Figure 2.1 and Figure 2.2.

A high percentage of the population of Rhode Island lives in and around Providence and along the various coastal inlets, which meet the Atlantic near Long Island Sound. The outer reaches of the state remain fairly rural. Most destinations are less than an hour away by car and public transportation unusually extends across the state, with all destinations costing $2 (about £1.50 in 2015). Providence County has an estimated 2015 population of around 633,000. Providence city has a population of about 179,000 and a metropolitan population of 1.6 million, which includes some Massachusetts towns just over the border ("US Census Bureau" 2010). The city is part of the Greater Boston commuting area of 7.6 million people, lying close to the end of a Boston commuter rail line.

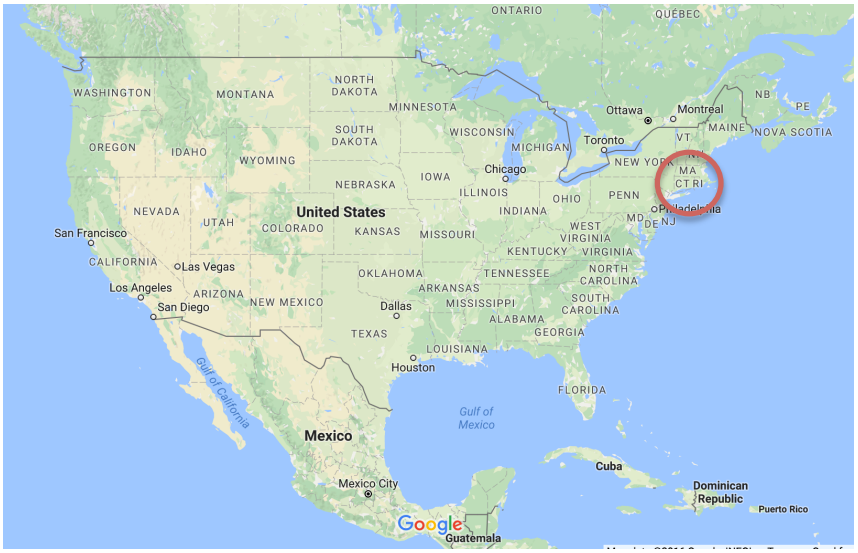

Figure 2.1: Southern New England in relation to the rest of the United States (Google Maps)

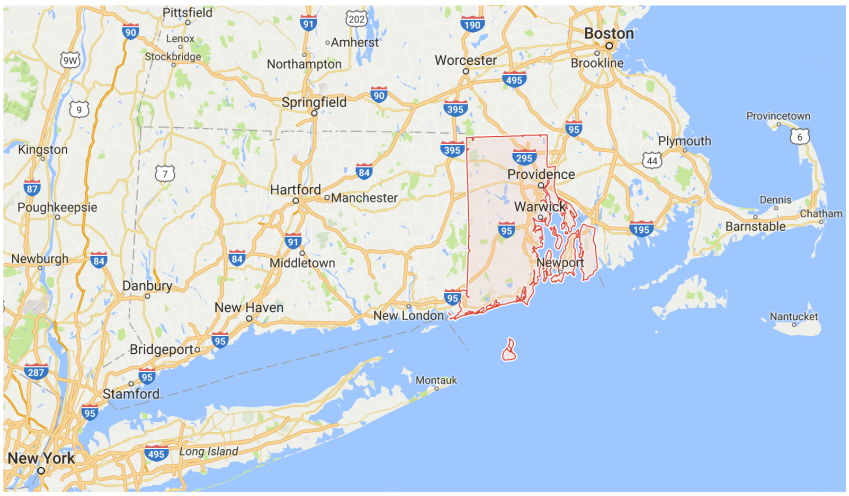

Figure 2.2: Rhode Island's location between New York and Boston (Google Maps)

Race by population size is detailed in **Table 1**. In Rhode Island, 12.6% of the population is foreign born and the largest ancestry groups include: Italian (18.6%), Irish (18.5%), English (11%), French, Portuguese, German, Canadian, Polish, and Cape Verdean (2.1%) ("US Census Bureau" 2010). The most common origins of foreign-born residents in

Providence County are Dominican (16.55%), Guatemalan (10.8%), and Portuguese (Portugal) (9%) ("US Census Bureau" 2010).

Table 1: Providence and Providence County[14]

	Rhode Island	Providence County	Providence
Population Total	1,052,567	626,667	178,042
White (%)	81.4	73.4	49.8
Black (%)	5.7	8.5	16
Asian (%)	2.9	3.7	6.4
Native (%)	0.6	0.7	1.4
Other (%)	9.4	13.7	26.4
Median Household Income	$56,852	$49,743	$37,501
Unemployment %	5.6	6.1	8.1
Below Poverty %	12.2	15.4	26.3

Rhode Island is a humid subtropical/humid continental climate with warm summers and cold winters. The largest industries are health services, tourism, manufacturing, education, and finance. While not a major metropolitan city itself, Providence is geographically a part of what has been called the 'Northeast megalopolis,' a term coined by geographer Jean Gottmann (1957) in the 1950s about the urbanisation of the Northeastern seaboard, from Boston to Washington D.C.. Today this area is also referred to as the 'Northeast Corridor' and is connected by an extensive rail service. The region's 'interdependent markets' comprises the fifth largest economy in the world ("The Northeast Corridor and the American Economy" 2014).[15]

[14] Data from ("Rhode Island Community Profiles" 2010).

[15] The median household income of Providence County is $50,565 and there are around 235,000 households. Home ownership is at 52.3% (US average 63%) The average property value is $211,000 (US average $194,500) ("Providence County, RI: Housing" 2015).

History of the 'Renaissance' City: from God's Divine Providence to Urban Regeneration

PROVIDENCE (Figure 2.3) was 'founded' in 1636 by Roger Williams, an exiled theologian and preacher from the Massachusetts Bay Colony who felt that God's providence had brought him there, and who—considered to be a tolerant and fair fellow—purchased the land from the Narragansetts, the native population of Rhode Island, part of the Algonquian peoples of North America. Williams' dissent from the Massachusetts Bay Colony was characterised by the ethic of tolerance (both for religion and for the Native American neighbours) and a desire for a more individualised connection to god, or 'liberty of conscious' to follow one's own connection with the divine (History.com 2009). Indeed, the word providence evokes a sort of stark hope, indicative of New England's Puritan ancestry and trust in the everydayness of God. Beyond a foreboding statue overlooking the city, the story of Roger Williams is conjured materially—on stickers, signs, and even in the name of a well-known band—in references to "What Cheer," the greeting the Narragansett Indians were said to give Williams when he crossed the Seekonk River: *What Cheer, Netop?* 'What news of cheer do you bring, Friend?' (see Figure 2.4). Urban Studies scholar Micah Salkind (2016) reflects on Williams' mythological presence:

> When culture workers in Providence, Rhode Island celebrate their participation in a progressive political legacy, they often invoke the City's founder and favoured counter-cultural ancestor, Roger Williams, a dissident rogue barred from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636.

Williams named many places after virtues, such as patience, prudence, and hope. Such naming persists to this day, with words like 'friendship' and 'hope' attached to the state seal

(see Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.5), businesses, and various other urban projects.



Figure 2.3: Downtown Providence skyline





Figure 2.4 and Figure 2.5: Sticker from a record shop named 'What Cheer' placed on a garbage can (left); The State of Rhode Island seal on a bridge over the Providence River. The seal contains an anchor with the word 'hope' (right).

Geographically, Providence is located on the northern portion of a network of coastal inlets and rivers that meet the Atlantic to the south; the sea has been a key part of its

economy from its early colonial 'founding' to a booming aquaculture industry and sea- or farm-to-table restaurant industry today. As with much of the US economy, the development of Rhode Island's shipping and manufacturing industries are shadowed by the slave trade. Salkind notes that while 60 percent of the US's slaving voyages sailed from Rhode Island in the 18th century, an early Quaker activist and abolitionist, Moses Brown, spurred a textile manufacturing industry with his co-founding of a textile manufacturing firm in 1789 (Salkind 2016).

Providence's industrial economy boomed over the next century, again helped in part by its convenient coastal geography and proximity to New York and Boston by sea (Salkind 2016). In addition to textiles, Rhode Island became known for machine parts and tools, steam engine manufacturing, silverware, and jewellery (Salkind 2016; Jerzyk 2009). A cultural economy emerged in tandem, with thirteen theatres in downtown Providence alone by 1915 (Salkind 2016). The 1920s saw a decrease in employment as many industries moved south, followed by the Great Depression and post-World War II 'white flight' to the suburbs (Salkind 2016). In his essay on Providence gentrification, local attorney Matthew Jerzyk (2009) explains that white flight was somewhat mediated by a flourishing economy of organised crime, most notoriously under Italian mafia boss Raymond Patriarcha. Rumours of mob-run businesses persist to this day.

Segregation was a large component of Providence's social geography throughout its history, and even today neighbourhood maps are shadowed by largely black, white, or Latino blocks (The Providence Plan 2005). Urban renewal programs beginning in the 1960s drove many African-Americans, Jewish immigrants, and others from the city's central areas, under the guise of historic preservation and modernisation (Jerzyk 2009). These included the

gentrification of Benefit Street on College Hill (near Brown University and RISD), the demolishing of Lippitt Hill to build University Heights shopping mall, and the construction and rerouting of highways through the city centre, dividing the wealthier East Side from the West Side (see Figure 2.7).

In the 1970s, Providence's mayor, Vincent 'Buddy' Cianci,[16] rebranded Providence 'The Renaissance City' as part of his urban renewal agenda (Salkind 2016). Providence was thus an early adopter of 'culture-led' urban regeneration, which would gain incredible traction in the following decades, with governments and development agencies adopting an idea of 'culture' that sparks economic recovery, often in post-industrial cities (Miles and Paddison 2005). Steven Miles and Ronan Paddison (2005) write that the popularity of 'culture-led' urban regeneration efforts 'reflect not only the rise to prominence of the cultural sphere in the contemporary (urban) economy, but how the meaning of culture has been redefined to include new uses to which it can be put to meet social, economic and political objectives' (834).

The Renaissance included eight separate but related construction projects, including the rerouting of the waterways to create a scenic riverfront and the building of the Providence Place Mall (Salkind 2016). Over time, from 1959-2000, there were over 20 plans developed regarding downtown Providence (B. D. Ryan 2006). While some efforts failed, others took hold and grew throughout time, remaining strongholds today (Salkind 2016; B. D. Ryan 2006). For instance, WaterFire, a 1996 site-specific sculptural installation by

[16] It is worth noting that Buddy Cianci was something of a Providence fixture and symbol of both growth and corruption over the last forty years: he was mayor from 1975 to 1984 and again from 1991 to 2002, when he was sentenced to federal prison for racketeering, conspiracy and extortion, among other charges, and was incarcerated for five years (Mooney 2016). He ran for mayor again in 2014, losing against Providence's current mayor, Jorge Elorza, and died during my fieldwork in January of 2016—an event which was brought up in casual street gossip for over a week. Regardless of Cianci's controversial legacy, under his leadership, "The Renaissance City" took hold amongst the city's developers, historic preservationists, and other elite.

Barnaby Evans—a series of bonfires on metal braziers placed in the river—grew into one of Providence's primary tourist attractions today; the bonfires are lit, performers and street vendors engaged, and the gondola boats set rowing at least once a month in the summer months (Salkind 2016).

Some have been critical of the 'complicity' of arts organisations and artists in this 'neoliberal' regeneration of cities, where ultimately certain individuals profit and racism and class concerns remain (Carmichael 2017). To account for this tendency towards exclusion, some urban regeneration efforts have encouraged the integration of community knowledge (Montoya 2013). In Providence, the AS220 art collective and The Steel Yard were able to partner with the city early on through both personal relationships and steady persistence (Salkind 2016). For Salkind: 'AS220 occupies a liminal space between a pro-growth group of developers and property owners, and the artists who, in different circumstances, they would be likely to displace' (p.44). The Steel Yard's goal was to scale down industrial fabrication in a sustainable, local capacity; its public works project 'hires local artists and artisans to design and fabricate an array of street furniture, like trashcans, tree guards and bike racks' (p.50).

Yet, even defining what constitutes an artists' community is fraught with economic and political agendas. 'Communities' are often articulated under political desires, including 'restoration, security, sociality, and solidarity' and as such they do not necessarily attend to the porous boundaries which constitute contemporary urban sociality and space (Clarke 2014:59). Indeed, many of Providence's living-and-working artists were not always on board with reconstruction efforts. Salkind describes the example of Fort Thunder, a collective of artists, many of them RISD or Brown graduates, who illegally lived in one of the abandoned mill buildings in Olneyville in the mid-1990s. This era became somewhat iconic in

Providence oral history for its visual and sound aesthetics, and I've frequently heard it spoken about with a sense of nostalgia, even by younger generations who were not involved.[17] In 1999 residents fought back against the proposed development of the area, known as Eagle Square, by New York-based development company Feldco, but they ultimate lost their living-working studio space. Jerzyk (2009) recognises that the saga of Olneyville's gentrification continued: the father of one of the activist-artists associated with Eagle Square ran a Baltimore-based development company, Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse (SBER), that focused on 'community development and mill revitalization.' After he visited Providence and saw potential, SBER developed the Rising Sun Mills into live-work studios for artists like his daughter. While locals were sceptical of another out-of-town developer, the project went forward. Tensions escalated with SBER's subsequent project, but the gentrification of Olneyville, for better or worse, was ultimately well underway. Jerzyk, who went door-to-door in 2007 to ask residents about gentrification, regards Olneyville as somewhat of a gentrification success story, ultimately keeping minority residents in their homes and providing refurbished luxury lofts in old mills as well as low-cost studios to artists. He also notes that negotiations between artists-activists and the city and developers 'create[d] new city standards pertaining to local hiring, the use of minority and women contractors, and the creation of a city-wide affordable housing trust fund' (Jerzyk 2009).

The 'Renaissance' city of Providence is considered a fairly successful post-industrial economy (Salkind 2016; Jerzyk 2009; B. D. Ryan 2006). However, while a variety of public and private partnerships that tout the importance of both historic preservation and the arts have driven a series of urban renewal programs, Providence's Renaissance is not without

[17] Warehouse and artist collectives of the 1990s—and their associated parties and creations—are written about elsewhere as a phenomenon of the 1990s (e.g. McKay, 1998), but it is worth noting that such collectives are sustained in many post-industrial cities today, particularly for early 20-somethings.

conflict. As illustrated above, racial and class tensions and disagreements between everyday citizens and larger-scale development agendas haunt its history. As an early adopter of 'culture-led urban regeneration,' Providence was innovative in its approach to post-industrial decline; however, questions of who is included and excluded from imagining the future of the city, and who benefits and who is harmed by changes, often emerge. I chose to describe Providence's overall economic, political and social history by zoning in on issues of gentrification and urban renewal, because they highlight some of the 'contested makings' of the city over time, questioning who is included and excluded from the 'material and symbolic fabric of the city' (Bullen 2016:8). I return to some of these issues in Chapter Six, when I consider the home as a part of the city, nation, and global world.

The Community Studied: Characterising the Households

THE HOUSEHOLDS studied were all linked to the city of Providence in their everyday flows. In efforts to attend to the multiplicities of experience and networks of power in which cities are continuously formed, urban anthropologists have, since the 1980s, conceptualised the city as a place of spaces and the flows that connect them; these include flows of labour, capital, goods, water, technology, ideas, art, as examples (McDonogh 2014; Low 2014; Crang 2002). Similarly, Luuk Slooter and Tessa Diphoorn (2016) highlight the 'hard city' constructed through material, economic, and political identities, or those 'that can be located on maps, counted in statistics and observed through its material and physical aspects' (8) and the 'soft-city,' constructed through imagined, affective notions of space and place, urban flows, and intimate entanglements of emotional, social, economic, ecological, and historical

attachments (Low 2014; McDonogh 2014; Ingold 2008; Probyn 2012). In this vein, 'Providence' emerged as more than just a geographically bound location (Figure 2.6 depicts the approximate household locations).

Three areas of the city are central to many of the households studied: the more affluent 'East Side,' the gentrified 'West Side,' and the continuously re-generated downtown, recently rebranded DownCity (see Figure 2.7 and Figure 2.8). If participants did not live in these areas, they were often tied to them through their work. Some lived and worked in the same areas of the city, manufacturing the sense of 'smallness' that Providence is known for. Walking from the top of the East Side to downtown takes about an hour, but driving or taking the bus is only 10-20 minutes, depending on traffic. Most participants owned cars, but some occasionally walked or took the bus to work. These experiences were more likely to be described as 'occasional' rather than a method of commuting. Only four participants regularly walked to work, which took between 5-30 minutes.

My own encounters mirror, in many ways, how individuals navigate finding community in a new locale, or even within a familiar locale. Writing of cities, Claire Bullen (2016) notes that the 'densely-entangled threads' (100) that are unique to each place are often marked by inconsistency and contradictory actions. So too are the makings of a community in an urban space: the households I studied were both similar and different; they lived in different neighbourhoods and had different relationships to those neighbourhoods; some knew one another, many did not. Throughout this thesis, ethnographic encounters with

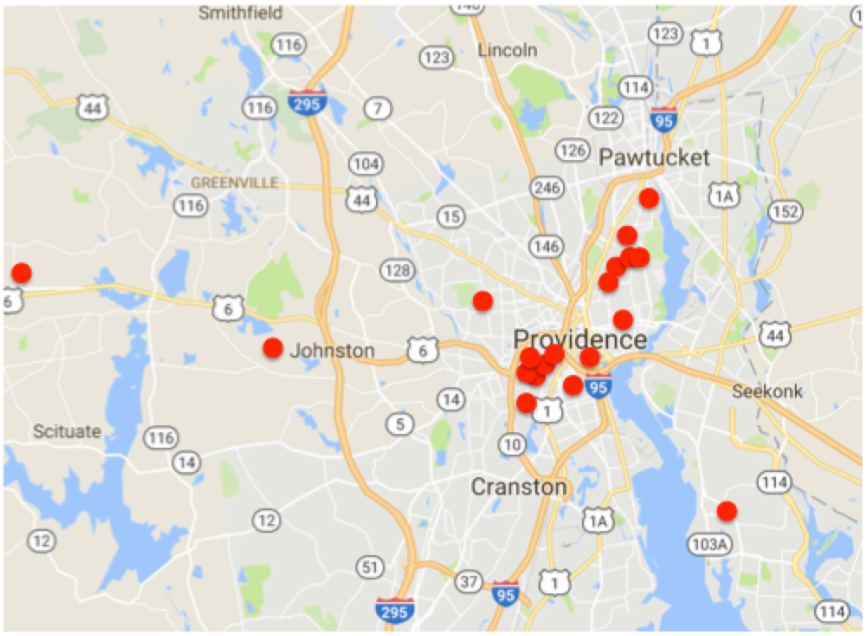

Figure 2.6: Approximate locations of the households studied in Providence County (Google Maps)

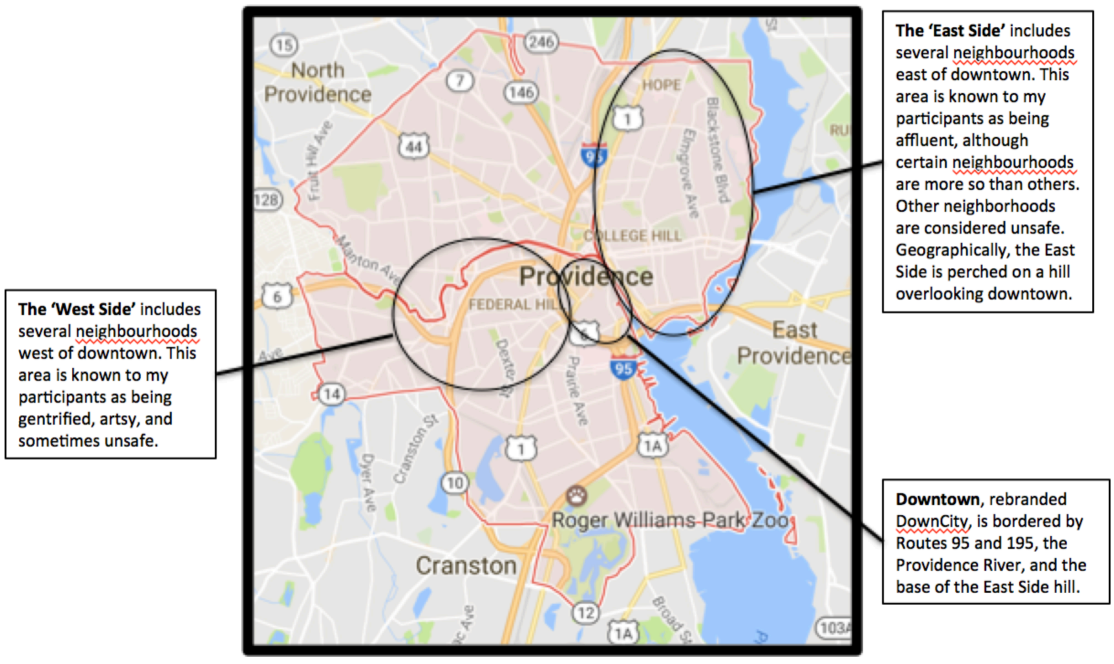

Figure 2.7: Three areas of the city that my participants and other informants frequently referred to (Google Maps)



Figure 2.8: Examples of Providence neighbourhoods: West Side (top row); East Side (middle row); and Downtown (bottom row)

individual households are detailed and analysed, with their similarities and contradictions emerging through their placement against each other. In this section, I provide basic background information that emerged from fieldwork in relation to the ethnographic context in order to characterise the households as a whole 'community' and to highlight their positionality within national, regional, and city contexts.

Participant occupations varied and included primarily university or other administration, retail, social services or mental health professionals, and IT and accounting. There were a notable number of practicing artists (four, none full-time) and small-business owners or independent contractors (seven). (Details are listed in the Appendix 1.) The majority of participants worked 9-5 hours, even when they ran their own companies or primarily met with clients. Several had more irregular schedules, in part because of negotiating childcare with their partners.

Most participants reported feeling 'busy.' Five households[18] had children under the age of ten, where daily life often revolved around negotiating work, family obligations, and alone time. Couples, including couples with adult children, theoretically had more flexibility in their everyday lives, bounded only by their own schedules and those of their partners, but they often amassed a collection of habits, obligations, and activities that made them 'busy.' These included obligations to non-resident family members, extended workout routines, regular social activities (e.g. card playing night), and volunteering. Single adults were the most flexible and tended to have more active social lives and significant solitary leisure time. Accompanying 'busy-ness' was also the feeling of being 'stressed out,' which was reason

[18] Families with children make up the widest geographical and ethnic range of the households studied.

enough to cancel a meeting with a friend (or anthropologist). Anxiety and stress were the most commonly discussed health and wellbeing concerns, with depression a less frequent but still notable experience. At least half of the participants reported having regular or periods of anxiety, and many more reported feeling regular stress from work or family. Having children is a source of stress for most families, regardless of whether or not they are planned, wanted, or healthy. However, at the other end of life, aging parents were also a source of stress. Changing household circumstances also caused significant stress, anxiety and depression. These primarily included marital separation and ending relationships and the addition or subtraction of family members. These were the changes that most profoundly disrupted daily routine and will be revisited throughout.

When it came to negotiating uncertainty and wellbeing on a very basic level, there were a variety of tactics that participants employed in the moment and over time. They function in tandem and against one another, and can vary over time. Some things function more as 'coping' mechanisms during hard times. Alcohol, 'emotional eating,' and avoidance were frequent coping mechanisms that appear throughout. Additionally, many participants implemented measure that they consciously knew provided stability. These frequently included: physical activity, like working out/going to the gym and yoga; meditation and other mindfulness practices; being in nature; and regular socialising with loved ones. Yoga was particularly popular in half of the households studied.

Several participants also engaged in complementary and alternative medicine, including herbalism, Reiki, homeopathy, aromatherapy, and naturopathic medicine/nutritional consulting. Other participants occasionally medicated anxiety with pharmaceuticals. Most would go to a biomedical physician for all serious ailments. Their

health practices were therefore marked by strategic and selective engagement, with complementary alternative medicine often easing the negative effects of uncertainty and promoting a sense of agency in the making of wellbeing. Similarly, many households show strategic and selective engagement with spiritual belief.[19] Some participants belonged to organised religions, such as Catholicism or other Christian sects, while others formed alternative and hybrid spiritualties, which reflect actual and adopted cultural pasts. The latter might be framed under the self-spiritualties of the Western 'the New Age movement' (Paul Heelas 1996). Often, spiritual practices resonate with American ethics of finding one's own path or engagement in community (Bellah et al. 1985). They also reflect a long legacy of religious freedom rooted in the Protestant search for direct connections to the divine and the fracturing of Protestantism into various dissenting sects. The search to connect the self to the divine is echoed in practices of complementary and alternative medicine, which Stuart McClean (2005) argues is 'likely to promote a variety of personal and interpersonal values such as self responsibility, psychological growth and creativity' (629), and where healing itself should be personalised.

Many of the elements discussed in this section are revisited throughout the thesis. However, this overall characterisation of the community is useful for grounding the ethnographic accounts that follow and provides some of the foundations for my argument. I revisit this greater contextual framing in Chapters Six and Seven. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five I focus on uncertainty and wellbeing in the home to illuminate the everyday makings of the good life. These chapters elucidate the 'domestic' tools individuals have to negotiate personal as well as political, economic, and social crises.

[19] Religion, spirituality, and experiences of awe are recognised in psychology studies to be related to tolerance for ambiguity (Valdesolo and Graham 2014) and wellbeing (Graham and Crown 2014).

Chapter Three - Attending to Insecurity: Everyday Material Culture, Insecurity, and the Home

INTRODUCTION

THIS CHAPTER FOCUSES on the everyday material culture of the home, including acts of cooking, eating, storing, cleaning, and using technology. These practices are a part of the routinized aspects of everyday life through which people reproduce and construct social worlds (Shove 2003). While I still rely on interviews, life history narratives, and conversation, I see them as interlaced with the 'stuff' of everyday life, which offers insights into what is not being articulated. Household entanglements give form and function to everyday uncertainty and are a means through which I explore how people attend to insecurity.

The practices addressed shed light on experiences of insecurity. I want to again draw attention to the general material security of the majority of households, particularly in comparison to those in impoverished circumstances. The households studied all self-identified as middle class, ranging from lower-middle income to upper-middle income, and faced a variety of levels of precarity, from recent job loss and the subsequent search for employment to struggling to care for two children on a single care-worker's salary. While the middle class offers insights into the anxieties of the potential for falling (Heiman 2015), it also offers insights into what people have to deal with even when they are relatively well off. The conflicts and compromises inherent in any home can be exacerbated in homes with a socioeconomic disadvantage (Hemmingsson 2014). Additionally, the comforts of a stable

middle class can also offer insight into the potential of human life and the encouragement of health and wellbeing on a structural level.

The ethnographic vignettes that follow describe encounters with the imagined *potential* for material insecurity (manifested in stock and storing) and current unsettling circumstances (such as transitioning homes after a divorce, upwards social mobility, and a rocky relationship). I draw on Giddens' (1991) concept of 'ontological security' to address the subjective, existential and embodied sense of security that an individual faces. Giddens describes ontological security as a 'coherent sense of "being in the world"' (37) and a basic trust in the continuity of life as it is. I draw from this to consider how circumstances or events that challenge one's notion of existence—or the sense of the self in the world—might provoke an embodied experience of insecurity. Embodiment can be construed under Csordas' (1993) terms as an 'indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world' (135). While the body is a way of knowing the world that is not consciously articulated, and thus difficult to study, an everyday material culture approach elucidates the body's daily habits and interactions, including interpersonal dilemmas and sensory encounters (Pink 2012; Pink 2009; Daniels 2010).

I first visit Bruce and Chloe in their kitchen, exploring their relationship through their dissatisfaction with material aspects of their home and how they relate to one another via a 'junk food' cabinet. I then consider other kitchens, bringing up issues of stock and storage which offer the promise of nutritional and food security, which is linked with a sense of ontological security. In the rest of the chapter, I explore senses of insecurity in more detail. I show how technology is used to renegotiate social relations after divorce. I then consider cleanliness and clutter in two case studies: one where a participant struggles with

her unknown future self as she confronts upwards social mobility through decluttering; and another where periodic cleaning and cleanliness mitigate anxiety. I finish with the manifestation of future insecurity by the creation and maintenance of a go-bag. In each of these ethnographic insights, I hope to show how material culture is deeply entwined within social relations. In telling these stories, I draw from both interviews and participant observation with the households in question.

The ethnography offers insights into uncertainty on multi-scalar and individual levels. In particular, it illustrates how uncertainty is mediated through the material and social 'assemblages that underpin, saturate, and sustain everyday life' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015:1).

BRUCE AND CHLOE'S KITCHEN: MATERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

UNDER THE BRIGHT OVERHEAD LIGHT of her kitchen, Chloe crumbles tempeh and mixes it with mayonnaise, a chopped apple, and lemon juice; walnuts and mango chutney; scallions and curry powder.

The overhead light is the type of fixture that was alluring when Chloe and her partner, Bruce, first bought the house a year ago: large and modern, it was a central focus piece over the kitchen countertop island; but it remains, like the rest of the house, a disappointment.

Having spent their first months in the house during the winter of 2015, when blizzard after blizzard restricted the movement of Providence residents to their homes and work places, Bruce and Chloe had hoped that summer would bring more 'openness' to their

lives: to the house, to their relationship, to Chloe's own sense of happiness within Rhode Island. But irritations—such as the reliance on the overhead light instead of sunlight to illuminate the dark kitchen—continue.

The recipe Chloe is following—for tempeh lettuce wraps—is an experiment in Bruce's absence because tempeh is a food that she loves which Bruce dislikes. When he comes home, he stands across from us at the island and tries a lettuce wrap at her coaxing.

'I like it,' he tells her, surprised.

I comment that the texture and taste are nothing like tempeh at all; he agrees.

'A new house came up today that I'm pretty excited about,' he says when the food discussion has ended. He shows us pictures. The outside is 'ugly,' a 'horrible green,' but the third floor is made into a 'beautiful' loft-style apartment with exposed brick. Chloe and I comment on what we see, but stick to the obvious: colours, space, light. I can sense that she is upset because they had a conversation earlier that day about possibly breaking up. As she invites me for dinner or coffee frequently, much of what I know of their relationship is filtered through her accounts. *Why was he showing me houses,* she wonders out loud to me later, *if we might break up?* During the interviews, Bruce and Chloe are candid about their ambivalence regarding their relationship, but I sense that they are practised in talking about it. Without the recorder present, in our more casual encounters, I notice the tension more than it is spoken about.

Bruce, a 45-year-old native of Providence, and Chloe, a 30-year-old transplant, have been together for two years, after Chloe moved here to be with him. He is an 'over-worked,' self-employed professional and Chloe works part-time while completing a professional masters degree. After a year of dating, when they decided to move in together, they looked for a house where they could 'put down roots.' They picked a standard Providence two-

family home on the East Side, which Bruce recognised as an investment: they could rent out the bottom floor, live upstairs, and potentially build into the half-finished third floor. There was a lawn and a large garage, which could be converted into an office down the line. At the time, they were happy with the home, but after only a few weeks of living there, neither particularly liked the house. Together, they cite a variety of factors contributing to their dissatisfaction, such as her starting school full-time and him not enjoying his work anymore. When I first came over, six months in, Bruce actually 'hated' the house. According to him, the place has 'bad juju' and it has made them both irritated and unhappy with one another. He explained also that it was a money-drain: 'the driving idea was getting both financially and spatially set up so that our life could have lots more openness. Time to travel. We talked about doing a month in Europe in the summer, a month in Europe in the winter, sort of moving in that direction, and if anything it's just imploded.'

Chloe does not like the house either, but her concerns are more about her role in Bruce's life: although they chose the house together, he owns it, and she never feels fully at home. What if they moved? I once asked. Chloe has taken a back-seat approach to this topic because it is Bruce's investment financially and thus, in the end, his choice. This means that while Bruce can focus on the house as a source of tension, Chloe has learned to focus her attention on Providence and the US more generally.

Chloe was born and raised in the US, primarily in the northwest, but spent the majority of her twenties abroad. Chloe's adjustment to her new life is consistently evident, and she confides in me the ebbs and flows of her relationship with Bruce and her discontent with Providence and the US. Is her sense of not feeling at home also because she missed living abroad and Providence had never really won her over? I once asked. Yes. That was related. For Chloe, it was impossible to tease out the house from her relationship, her issues

with the US and Providence, and her struggles with her body and diet.

Diet, fitness, and how they relate to Chloe's productivity are common topics of discussion when we are alone together. Both Bruce and Chloe regularly go to the gym, but the fact that Bruce is not a healthy eater makes her worry about his health as well as for her own eating habits while living with him. Her family has a history of diabetes and she knows that a bad diet is related. Bruce readily admits that he can eat several cartons of ice cream in the evening, sometimes without even eating dinner. 'I'm a walking diabetes time bomb,' he told me once, adding, 'with good genes.' He noted that no one seemed worried about it, including his doctor, but Chloe disagreed, laughing: 'I don't think other people understand when we say you are a sugar fiend what that actually means. I've seen the horror first hand.'

As Bruce and Chloe's relationship ebbs and flows, these underlying tensions become more or less apparent. During our second interview it seemed as if they each had their own separate narrative surrounding the house that the other only occasionally understood. The strength in their communication was faltering, and they often interrupted one another as they took me back and forth between different rooms, answering my questions in a disjointed manner. At dinner, they had an argument in front of me, one that might have become more heated had I not been present. The atmosphere is particularly tense, their emotions palpable.

In this interview, I am asking them about health and wellbeing, questions that bring us all over the house, from the 'gym cabinet' in the pantry to the 'meditation bench' in the TV room to the bedroom to the kitchen. We land, again and again, in the kitchen, which has long been a particular space of entanglement. In the first interview they wanted to begin in the kitchen, agreeing that 'This is where a lot of stuff happens.' Bruce hates the view, the ugly parking lot and apartment complex next door, the lack of light. Chloe points to a tiny

cactus on the windowsill and says that it makes her happy. She also explains that she does not mind the kitchen itself, as it's good for cooking, and she spends a lot of time in there, 'listening to music and making things.' However, Chloe explained to me: 'There's something I want to capture about the kitchen, but it's not really about the room itself because I really love most parts of the room, but there's something about the like—' She opens a drawer next to the refrigerator.

Chloe has brought up this drawer many times before, referring to it first as a 'cabinet' (I was surprised to find it was actually a drawer). She first brought up the cabinet in relation to being back in the US while we were having coffee at an East Side café. The 'junk food' cabinet, she said at that time, is full of 'all sorts of different types of chips' (aka crisps). She explained that when she moved back to the US she ended up taking part in exactly what she hated: over-eating. When she lived abroad, she didn't have junk food in her house. She was vegan and ate fresh foods, which she bought on her hour-long walk home from work everyday. Here she drives, she shops at a major health food chain (which might be good if not for the variety of expensive snack options), and she misses the foods she used to prepare that Bruce will not eat. Tempeh is her favourite. Chickpeas are also mentioned. Now she eats 'tons of junk food' and has gained 20 pounds since she got back. Chloe is a fairly slim woman, and this weight gain is not evident to me, but she feels 'unhealthy.' The things that she misses about living abroad now are things that used to bother her, like the lack of variety in diet soda. She used to love visiting the US and having so many choices when there was only diet coke where she lived before. Now she misses the simplicity.

The cabinet has also been mentioned as 'Bruce's cabinet' and Chloe laments that she only eats out of it just because it is there. 'My diet has gotten SO bad,' she texted me at one point. 'I'm blaming the effect of Bruce's bad eating normalizing such.' She often mentioned

what she called 'emotional eating:' *I wouldn't be doing this to myself if our relationship was working*, she admitted at one juncture.

The first time I saw 'the junk food cabinet' I started laughing. Expecting bags of Frito-lays and Doritos, I instead see an assortment of different types of nuts and snacks from Whole Foods Market. Whole Foods, trademarked 'America's Healthiest Grocery Store,' is one of the more centrally located supermarkets on the East Side of Providence, and many of my participants shopped there, even when they lived outside of the city.

In our interview, after Chloe opens up the drawer, I say to Bruce: 'She's brought up this drawer so many times.'

'In what context?' he wonders.

'Well, it's terrible in all sorts of ways,' Chloe begins to explain to him, 'but the ways in which it's terrible have been evolving, so I think for many things. I mean, I think I was amazed when we first got together at like the amount of chips you ate, and there were some parts of it like the junk food aspect, but also the coming back to American culture and the range of choice, in like processed shit and all of that, and like packaging and the convenience aspect—Are you, are you listening?'

Bruce is looking at the screen of his phone—which actually strikes me as unusual for him whilst in the company of others. Earlier, in our circuitous tour of their home, Bruce told me that his phone is in the way of his sense of wellbeing, stating 'it's become like a horrible appendage I can't get away from.' He's actually been on his phone ever since, interrupting us once to ask for my email so he could send me photos of the house.

'I'm listening,' he responds to Chloe now.

She offers an annoyed 'okay.'

'It's just Tim's text. Speaking of chips...' He takes a bag from the drawer and rips it

open. The crinkling sound of the chip bag can be heard throughout the next ten minutes of the recording. The phone remains in his other hand.

Chloe continues: 'Ok so there's a lot about that. But then this has also become where I keep all the nuts, I binge eat, and shit like that. So it's gone from like a metaphor of all the terrible stuff to my own bad habits and all the things that aren't good for me.'

I respond: 'I have to say I was surprised when you opened it— when I first asked you to show me— that it was healthy junk food. Do you know what I mean? Like it was like Whole Foods junk food.'

Bruce, crunching on chips, says: 'it is relatively healthy. You have seeds and nuts.'

Chloe explains: 'Well I think in part because this has been some of my culture shock, like that you can get, you know, and these I bought, but like that there's X number of flavours of whatever that is, like, fat-free whatever—'

Bruce, chewing, interrupts: 'These are pretty good. Cheddar and sour cream.'

'And like these wasabi soy,' Chloe continues. 'It's just crazy to me. It used to be fucking Doritos or corn chips.'

Bruce is preoccupied with the flavours themselves: 'These are really fucking good,' he tells me. 'Do you like wasabi?'

'I like that all she did was open the drawer—'

'And I start eating. No appetite—'

At this point, the drawer becomes such a distraction that I'm not sure any of us are listening to each other at all. Chloe and Bruce speak over one another, at the same time:

'And that's part of what the thing is…' Chloe begins.

'I have no appetite at all, but I'm just eating it up,' Bruce again highlights.

Chloe: 'And there is something about the convenience and how responsive I am in

these ways…'

Here, I am guilty of contributing to the chaos: 'Oh, those are good!' I say of the chips.

'Yea. It's pretty bad,' Bruce responds. Then, turning to Chloe, he pulls us back together: 'So is that drawer one of the things that does not contribute to your wellbeing?'

'Yea I feel less so now… there's something I'm trying to capture about my bad eating habits and my anxious eating habits that isn't really capturable in one particular thing, because I actually like this room, unlike you, but some of my habits in here I don't like.'

'So it's more about the self than the space?' I wonder.

'Yea— something about the intersection.'



Figure 3.1: Bruce and Chloe's 'junk food' drawer

ONCE OPENED, the contents of Bruce and Chloe's junk food drawer—shiny, crinkly chip bags stuffed with the memory of salty satiation—immediately inspired human action. The drawer is a 'mediator' (Latour 2000) in their lives, part of a chain of influence stemming from the national and global food system. Chloe is conscious of some of the agentive nature of the drawer: its mere presence influences their eating habits and the sheer range of foods is associated with the consumption and choice evident in US capitalism. What is not recognised are the global encounters imbued in the flavours of the chips ('Wasabi-Soy') or the ways in which the opening of the drawer becomes a vehicle for Bruce's defiance. In his immediate eating of the chips, is Bruce rejecting self-responsibility for his health required by Chloe's 'healthism' (Crawford 2006)? Is he engaging in the pleasures of flavour and texture offered by the palatability of 'junk food' (Coveney 2006)? Or, is the crinkle and crunch of his eating chips a metaphor for the struggles in their relationship? Is she cringing at the sound? Is he aware that he is chewing with his mouth open? Will Chloe too succumb to eating the rest of the bag later that night?

Ultimately, the situation with the drawer suggests that doubt about their relationship is brought to the fore by the negotiation of independent habits after moving in together. The disruption of Chloe's diet became inextricable from their concerns about their relationship's continuity. Other instances, such as the disconnect between their conversation about breaking up and Bruce sharing possible new homes, undermined the fact that their future together was deeply unstable. Irritations with one another emerged through the house, which was never quite right, but never terrible either. Ultimately, their circumstance was deeply uncertain; they did not know what they wanted, or what the future would bring.

The mutability of their relationship was a circumstance that provoked ongoing

interpersonal insecurities that had to be negotiated through material and social means. Sometimes this included the ingestion of comfort through food or alcohol. Chloe discussed 'emotional eating' when she felt things were not going well for her. Absent from the narrative above is Chloe's recognition that although alcohol helped her in the moment, it exacerbated her sense of wellbeing over time; she would therefore go through periods of not drinking. Other times they tried to enact habits that would bring them together, such as experimental dinners they might both enjoy. Communication, which at points helped them cope with their situation, was evidently lost by the time Bruce pulled out his phone and partially checked out of the conversation.

I begin with Bruce and Chloe's story because it reflects the inextricable entanglements of verbal reflection, material things, social relations, and the body in the data that I collected. Household objects or spaces were often used to mediate, symbolise, or draw attention to troubling circumstance. Additionally, stories often digressed, overlapped, and merged in relation to social and material relations.

KITCHEN STOCK AND SENSES OF FOOD SECURITY

I TURN NOW TO two more kitchens, where practices of storing food take place. Daniels (2010) describes storage of material goods as facilitating both circulation and accumulation: whereas circulation of goods within the ebbs and flows of everyday life is expected, the very existence of storage spaces can assist in accumulation. In the US, large refrigerators and particularly second freezers (often located in a garage or basement) assist in the accumulation of food. As I will show in this section, such food provisioning in some of the homes studied, mostly families with children, was intimately linked with a sense of

security. While this section considers how people respond to the potential for material insecurity, it also highlights the interrelatedness of food, refrigerators, and diet with uncertainty.

During interviews, I sought to explore one kitchen object in greater detail: the refrigerator. I photographed participants' refrigerators (and sometimes freezers, if they opened them) and recorded the responses that came with this request and action. As a technology, the refrigerator was transformative in household food provisioning. Today, a refrigerator in the American home is ubiquitous, often rented or sold with a housing unit. As such, it is 'domesticated' and is no longer novel (Hand and Shove 2004). Ewart and Luck (2012) differentiate between 'gadgets' and 'appliances:' whereas gadgets 'are less humble and more demanding of our attention,' 'appliances are essentially unobtrusive, and usually come into view only as their purpose requires' (11). The refrigerator comes into view through acts of storing, cooking, eating, reorganising, and cleaning. Its presence is also evoked in a sensorial capacity when new refrigerators are purchased or encountered, forgotten food rots and smells, suddenly becoming aware of the ever-present hum in a silent home, or the spread of the refrigerator's light in a dark kitchen. Its technology is considered primarily in relation to energy, such as family members leaving the door open for too long (particularly children), components of it breaking, or when the power goes out and the food—especially frozen food—is at risk of spoiling. (Power loss in this region generally occurs due to windy storms, hurricanes or blizzards). In essence, apart from these occasional obtrusive qualities, the fridge generally fades into the background, which actually makes it a powerful force in the everyday under what Daniel Miller (1987) describes as 'the humility of things:' objects have power to affect our everyday experiences merely by the fact that we do not think of them.

I begin with Michelle and Sean's refrigerator and how it both attends to the *possibility* of insecure circumstances and offers food security on a tight budget. Michelle and Sean are both in their late thirties and parents to a toddler. When I first came to their home, Michelle pointed out a list that was tacked to the outside of their upstairs refrigerator that recorded the items stored in the basement freezer. She explained:

> I came from a family that had Depression-era left over anxiety around food, so we always had a ton of food in the house. And I tend to have more than the average– well I don't know if I have more than the average person, but this piece of paper here tells me [see Figure 3.2] what's in the freezer in the basement, because otherwise I would just buy stuff and not know. But there is no need for us to have this kind of frozen food in the basement, there are three of us and we get paid.

Six years ago, when Michelle, then single, purchased this house, she bought the refrigerator, stove, washer, and dryer on Craigslist, an online classifieds forum, for no more than $75 each. 'They're probably not energy efficient,' she told me, 'but they do the work.' She described her life as recently turned upside down, shifting from being a single woman in her thirties, a homeowner and working professional involved in local politics, to being married with a child and dog within two years. The downstairs freezer and the upstairs list helped her feed her family on a tight, month-to-month budget, and integrated her past, defined by practicality, independence, and a sense of utility, with her current situation. When I visited Michelle and Sean nine months later, she called a day ahead to tell me there was a new addition to the family, a two-month old infant. She was matter-of-fact while I, surprised that she had left this out of our emails, showed up at her house eager to hear about the new family member. At one point, mid-way through the interview she told me that, 'if you take photos again today, the freezer is full of breast milk.' (Figure 3.3)

Martin Hand and Elizabeth Shove (2007) found that 'ways of living with freezers' are about 'preservation and procurement,' 'care, convenience, and temporal coordination,' and

'marginalization and specialization.' The transformation of Michelle's freezer did not change the practical use of space for storing food provisions for the future, but it did move towards a distinct type of specialisation: the storage of breast milk. As such, Michelle's new use of the freezer was symbolically loaded—whereas Hand and Shove found that for one family 'authenticity' mattered and thus the freezer was used for storing home-grown foods, Michelle's freezer suggested that her habits of practicality, independence, and utility endured through motherhood. Telling me about the breast milk came at a moment when she discussed the ease of transition back to working life: she had a husband who took care of the children and she was lucky that her daughter took to the bottle without much objection. She later showed me the freezer with a sense of both humour and pride.



Figure 3.2: Michelle's list on her refrigerator



Figure 3.3: Freezer before and after the baby

What underlies Michelle's initial narrative about her refrigerator is a desire for security even when she is on a budget. She wants her family to be fed, her appliances to work, and her working-life to continue without much of a hitch. This implies an underlying desire for familial security that is symbolised by a well-stocked freezer. Michelle's later narrative illustrates that her desire to stock the freezer with food translates to the storage of her own breast milk, which assures that her infant daughter will be fed while Michelle is at work.

For Rachel, age 43 years, a 'well-stocked kitchen' similarly gave her a 'sense of security,' which she explicitly articulated as necessary for her wellbeing, even if her husband, Adam, 45, was concerned about the amount of money spent on groceries. Their refrigerator was primarily full of fresh fruits and vegetables, containers of leftovers, with yogurt, cheeses, various milks (almond, oat, cow), and condiments, mostly all bought from the farmers market or Whole Foods. Despite his financial concerns, Adam acknowledged the fact that Rachel 'provides a lot of really phenomenal food,' which was responsible for helping him have a healthier diet.

For Adam, the interview itself became a way of relating to Rachel, and when she explained her desire for security, his interested was piqued. He later told me:

> …it was helpful for me to overhear what she said... I feel compassionate about the situation, whereas it stresses me out that there is a lot spent on groceries, just financially. I worry about it, I always send her messages whenever it is bill time about it. Some of them are not so coded... Like, isn't it interesting how much we've given to Whole Foods this pay period? I didn't realize that she feels calmed down and safe if the kitchen is stocked up... so if our big problem is that there is too much organic food around, maybe that is something I can live with... To me that's way better and a hell of a lot cheaper than having a partner with a closet full of-- or even if my closet was filled with $100 pants.

For Rachel and Adam, food provisioning was a source of tension around finances, reflecting Shove et al.'s (2007) observation that the kitchen is a 'site in which tensions

between economic and cultural capital are played out, and in which cultural knowledge and judgments of competent social practice are materialized' (24). For Rachel and Adam, the kitchen was ultimately a source of nourishment and family connectedness (the dinner table was cited as well), and a space where they navigated their sense of 'harmony' (their word) with one another and interpersonal wellbeing.

IN THE EXAMPLES above, I highlight two family homes that are actually quite materially secure but where food security is still a present psychosocial need. While attempts to manage experiences of insecure circumstances (and thus promote wellbeing) can be material in their nature (e.g. storing food), the material can also serve as an evocation of what is not present: the desire for love, the unknowns of death, and, as always, the uncertain future. I move away from food and kitchens now to consider a household where transition and relationship anxieties are witnessed via negotiations with technology.

SCREEN TIME AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

FOR TRISHA, a 37-year-old mother of three, 'screen time' is an umbrella term for a conglomerate of things—an iPad, the TV, and computers—which her children use to play games, watch TV or movies, conduct home-schooling lessons, talk to friends, and research ideas. Piano lessons are a designated 'no-screen' time: they play outside, draw, or invent games while each child takes their lesson in turn. During the week in February when I stayed with Trisha's family, we picked up her children at their father's house and drove forty-five minutes to piano lessons in New Bedford together. Trisha and her ex-husband, who had been separated but co-habitating for two years, decided to move into separate houses in

September, a transition which has come with significant re-adjustment issues for both Trisha and her children. Rules around 'screen-time' are generally agreed on between Trisha and her ex-husband, who have decided to continue co-parenting responsibilities. These rules involve when, where, and for how long they can play Internet or computer games, talk to friends online, watch TV and movies, and work on education-related Internet websites (such as foreign language training). As such, 'screen time' functions as a form of household capital (Bourdieu 1986; Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992).

The ride to piano lessons in New Bedford—where the no screen time rule will be enacted today—is accompanied by periodic and persistent pleas from the middle child, Avery, who is 6, to go back to his father's house after the lessons so that he can play a specific game only available on the computer there. Trisha is growing irritated as she repeatedly tells him no. Finally, she tells him: *if you're choosing houses based on video games, I'm going to talk to Dad about not playing that video game at his house. That's not how we pick houses.* She repeats this last sentence several times, wanting him to understand. When we arrive, Avery will not get out of the car. After she brings her youngest child, Cara, who is 4, into her lesson, Trisha gets into the car to talk it out with Avery; although I cannot hear them, she appears calm, and to be speaking without raising her voice. When they get out of the car she sounds irritated. 'There's always one of them,' she says under her breath to me, and then asks him if he wants his stuffed rabbit. Avery nods and begins to cry, but Trisha asks him again, desiring a verbal response. Avery finally says yes, takes the rabbit, and follows Trisha into the building, where he climbs on her lap and cuddles, slowly reverting back to his social and talkative self.

For much of the remainder of the trip—which involves a visit to their favourite café after lessons—Avery asks us questions about Yin and Yang, which have something to do

with this game. Trisha and I both give him our thoughts, and I draw him a picture on a napkin. This picture circulates for some time during the week, and that night Avery shows me a video on YouTube from 'Little Ted' (Ted Talks for kids) about Yin and Yang. In this way, Avery integrates the video game fiasco into his play, participating with his mother's household, as required.

At the café after piano lessons, when we are not talking with the kids, Trisha tells me about different things that have happened in her past that have caused her life to drastically change, including many moves throughout the Northeast and a failed relocation to Texas with her husband and oldest child. The family's recent transition was emplotted in a long history of movement, with its accompanied psychological and physical hardship and nostalgia for better times. Although she never explicitly states that Avery's earlier breakdown was about the recent transition between homes more than the video game, she seems to suggest it, or at least interlace her own anxieties about the situation with her son's behaviour.

The next morning, I wake to find Trisha alone in the living room. She tells me that she got in a fight with her oldest, Mark (age nine years), who is now pouting in his room. She points to how they had not put away their cups from last night. 'I don't ask for much,' she tells me, 'but they won't do dishes or clean up after themselves. I do all this stuff for them and they won't even take the dog out.' She had taken away 'screen time' until they learned to help around the house. When it came time for Mark to practice his Spanish lesson on the iPad in the morning, she told him this too counted as screen time. She feels that Mark became unnecessarily angry with her and was unkind.

Her ex-husband is also having difficulties with getting the children to do chores and they had been debating how to handle it for some time. Reducing screen time is the latest plan as she had noticed a 'direct correlation between screen time and behaviour': when they

were allowed screen time only at the end of the day, they were 'angels' in the morning, but if they had it in the morning, they would be unhelpful all day. Trisha recognises the recent disobedience as her 'own fault.' Since the move, things had not been very good. She reminds me again of all the family friends that had died this year and the loss of their beloved family dog right before she and her husband decided to live in two different homes. *I now have 'severe depression,'* she tells me casually.

I have heard of her depression before— since our first interview three months prior in November, she has been candid about this experience. In the interview, she explained to me that she battled with depression for much of her life, and I asked if she felt that she was going through a period of more extreme depression. 'I'm definitely in a very depressed place,' she said. Trisha's past came up a lot in our conversations, particularly surrounding how she never thought she would 'be here' at this point in her life, and although nothing was ever framed as a regret, she seemed to consider her failed aspirations at much length. Although her depression was triggered by things that were out of her control, mainly the death of several friends and her dog, she seemed to suggest that her lost dreams and current family struggles could have been somehow avoided had she chosen a different life path. (Trisha's narrative is revisited in the next chapter).

In the material home, Trisha's depression is inextricable from her everyday practice: she brings it up in relation to why she was never able to get her house in order, which remained littered with unpacked boxes for many months after she moved in. The clutter and disorganisation bother her, but at the same time she finds she has no time to deal with it, and when she does have time she just wants to sleep because of the depression. Meal times have also become irregular, and Trisha suggests that although she likes to make 'home-cooked, organic, and hormone-free' meals ('the last thing I'll give up is the quality of their food,' she

tells me), she says she often doesn't eat with them because she is fluttering around catching up with things. The dining table is also her worktable because her office is full of boxes from the move. During my visit with them, the night before her fight with Mark, we had dinner at 9:30 p.m. and the kids were put to bed right afterwards.

Fighting with Mark has become a part of my morning routine, she laments after Avery emerges from the room to tell her Mark is crying. *I better go see him.* I help Avery and Cara as they prepare to take the dog out and when I return, Mark is lying on the living room floor while Trisha does Reiki[20] on him.

All in all, during the past twenty-four hours, I did not see a screen apart from when Avery showed me the Little Ted video about yin and yang on the iPad. The iPad—which is shared—lies on a living room table next to the couch. Occasionally I catch the children making glances at it. They might invent an excuse to look at it: *can I check if there is a message from my friend?* or *can I check my email?* Trisha generally says yes, and their desire for the screen is momentarily sufficed. Its presence is *felt* more than it is used—something of a memory of usage, of possibility, of escape or indulgence. It is symbolic. It is a family capital. Usage is articulated with undertones of embodied uncertainty: whose house will the children go to tonight? When will dinner be? Will mom decide to pick this fight, or let it go? 'Screen times' is in some ways a constant: *at some point* Trisha will allow them *to do something* on the iPad or watch TV upstairs. Connecting with Trisha herself is far more of a process: it takes real work. It takes fights and tears. It is irregular. Although the children may not be explicitly conscious of this, and Trisha herself struggles with knowing they need more than she can currently give, it is obvious to me that the children only settle after they have interpersonal connection with her. Screen time might quiet them temporarily while they scroll their hands

[20] 'Reiki' is a Japanese healing technique that has gained popularity in some parts of the US.

over the screen, but afterwards restlessness will set back in. However, after a good hour of connecting with Trisha—sitting on her lap, receiving Reiki, or asking her questions about yin and yang—and they'll occupy themselves for hours. For Trisha it is slightly different: 'screen time' and the accompanying battles with her children entrap her in the realities of everyday life; Reiki, however, gives her a means through which she can reconnect with her son.

I was never invited to visit inside Trisha's ex husband's home, but I understood that for the entire family, the boundaries of the homes were fluid and far from static. In paying attention to 'processes of conflict, compromise and decision making,' particularly in non-nuclear households, Gill Valentine (1999) recognises that children have significant power over consumption practices, learning to challenge things like diet at early ages. While she writes on food consumption specifically, she observes that 'multiple discontinuities in household composition' such as the 'discordant time-space routines' created by a sometimes absent parent, are full of '(re)negotiations' and '(re)productions' of consumption practices. While Valentine simply observes the 'multiplicities of times and spaces' within many contemporary homes, I question what types of uncertainties these fluctuations sustain and what length of time it can take for bodies to readjust, new identities to be formed, and working routines established, before further renegotiation is needed again. Can a coveted object become a means through which children understand their own insecurities in these shifting times and places?

For Mark, Avery, and Cara, 'screen time' seemed inseparable from their daily experiences—it became a way in which they responded to a variety of unwanted situations, from transitioning homes to not wanting to do chores within these homes. Screens are not solely a means through which the external world is brought into the home sparking a negotiation of 'ontological security' based on exposure to modernity (Giddens 1991;

Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992); rather, they become a means through which they negotiate the ontological insecurity triggered by divorce and the move between two homes. Ultimately conflict ended in comfort from their mother, not the use of the iPad. Tom McDonald's (2014) ethnography of the arrival of internet in Chinese homes highlights that 'the bulk of concerns over internet use do not directly centre on how to incorporate the internet into the home, but are rather focussed on using the internet to affect and transform others within the home' (27). Similarly, 'screen time' becomes a way to transform and affect relationships within Trisha's new home. In essence, I suggest, 'screen time' is a way of negotiating acts of love, particularly between two parents' homes. Slowly, and with much [in]attention to the world in which they exist, Trisha and her children recreate their 'home.'

TEMPORAL INSECURITIES

Clutter and the Future

I NOW VISIT THE HOME of Nicole (age 32 years) and Claudio (age 30 years), where material security is never in question and their relationship is not in doubt. Nicole and Claudio are instead on an upward trajectory of social mobility and are engaged to be married later in the year. Their example illustrates that approaching uncertain futures, even if they are positive, can provoke anxiety.

For some time, Nicole has been working to 'declutter' the home, which she has rented for the past six years. Her motivation is two-fold: she recognises that she will eventually have to move, after they marry and especially if Claudio keeps his job in New York and that Claudio prefers less clutter in his living space. Having visited Nicole and

Claudio several times a month and having lived with them for a week, I watched Nicole's process of decluttering throughout the year. She first brought it up in relation to Marie Kondo's (2014) popular book, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organising.* Once I came in and she had a pile of Tupperware in the living room, which she had taken out of the kitchen cupboard to match covers with bases and throw away mismatches. Another time she had a pile of garbage bags full of things to be given away. The slow removal and re-arrangement of stuff throughout the year increasingly affected the overall aesthetic of the home. In addition, several new acquisitions were incorporated which more accurately reflected their joint tastes, such as a painting of Providence.

However, it was the everyday routines that threatened the success of this slow change. Often, particularly during last minute visits, I learned that the dishes were not done from dinner the night before or the laundry was hanging out to dry because of the broken dryer (Figure 3.4). These instances revealed some of the underlying considerations Nicole faced. The broken dryer, for instance, remained broken because Nicole was afraid to ask the landlord for a new one. She felt she had asked him for two many things over the course of staying in the house, and that he was very nice to have not raised the rent. She worried that if she asked for new things—the dryer or a new oven—he might raise the rent.



Figure 3.4: Claudio's drying clothes

Nicole also 'hid' her clutter in her attic, the basement, or the spare bedroom. She consistently cited these spaces as future projects to be sorted, but did not get to them. So while her visible house—what guests saw—became ever-the-more minimalist and aestheticized according to their joint tastes, the storage spaces remained problematically 'in the way' of her ultimate goal of purging all unnecessary things. Our final interview, at the end of the year, provided insight into why Nicole felt that 'clutter' continued to be a problem in her life despite her efforts to remove it.

This portion of the interview begins when I ask them about sources of tension in the home. Claudio, who speaks with a heavy Italian accent, tells me: 'I think I prefer to live in a neat space, and here is not neat.'

Nicole retorts: 'I will tell you a secret about messy people and it's that we also prefer to live in a neat space, and we self-sabotage so we don't get to have it.'

I ask if she will explain this more.

'Yea, it's like, um, really similar to binge eating, where like, people don't want to be fat, but they are self-sabotaging. That's what I do… I think from what I've read about people's psychology is that people are more scared of being happy than being—like you don't—if things are perfect—'

Claudio attempts to help: 'You know what, if she didn't have to spend the time cleaning, I think the questions is, what would she do with that time?'

Nicole continues, 'No, but it's like, if I had that figured out—you know how you always have to have one part of your life where you don't have your shit together so that's then the thing that you are working on, because if you had everything sorted out then you'd have to make real goals, and like achieve them? So like, if my house were clean—so then you have that in your head, like I can't do X, Y, Z because I have to clean my house, or I can't do X, Y, Z because I have to lose 15 lbs., or I can't do X, Y, Z because I have to get a better job before I have the money for it, so you do all these little things to keep you in that state of like, I have to sort out this one, baseline thing because if you finished all your baseline things and found that it was like, oh now I'm pretty good, I can set a five year plan, that's scary.'

Claudio adds: 'I think we resist changing for the achievement of goals and we don't want to achieve those goals because then it means that we have to find new ones, and work towards those. And also—'

Nicole playfully speaks over him: 'And also I'm very lazy.'

'—we are very familiar with our weaknesses and we don't want to solve them and then find out that we have other—'

'Other, bigger weaknesses,' I contribute.

Nicole finds that we are all in agreement at this point: 'Yea exactly. But that's the thing. Because I've read stories of people who—again this comes up a lot related to diets—

like someone was super overweight and lost like 100 lbs. and suddenly was like, I've been telling myself my whole life, when I finally get thin, then I can take this big trip, or I can do this or that, or like everything will be solved when I'm thin, now I am, and I'm still not happy. Then it's like this horrible, like, oh no, I conquered this crazy issue, and it didn't fix anything, so I think that that's what we do. So for me it's like, once we get organized, everything will fall into place, and I'll be like my best self.'

In their chapter on kitchen renewal and design, Shove et al. (2007) find that 'discontent sets in' when the imagined ideal is not 'realized in practice' (32). I find Nicole's foresight into this future discontent intriguing. Of all the households studied, Nicole and Claudio were on the most rapid-paced ascent to an upper class. Claudio had grown up with two working professional parents who had three homes and a housekeeper but spent most of his adult life on a graduate-student stipend, while Nicole's family was solidly middle class. Nicole—one of the few people I've met who adores her job—now works as a research librarian for a university. When they met Claudio was still a student, but after graduating this year he took a high-paying job in New York City. Thus, over the course of the year, Nicole and Claudio transitioned from living together on loose budget to having two rentals—one in Providence and one in New York—and having considerably more disposable income. They enjoy buying local artisan products, from fine art and pottery to artisanal delicacies from the farmer's market, and like to explore Providence's new restaurants, meet for cocktails, and drink nice port or whiskey after meals.

For Nicole, a sense of wellbeing comes from the ongoing nature of the task of decluttering, mitigating the uncertainties of a future self. While her narrative may have been a defensive response to Claudio's desire for a certain standard of tidiness in their future life together, Claudio himself was happy to co-construct her experience. The co-construction of

such 'conjugal fables' help 'restore coherence' (Kaufman, 1998:11) to a household because couples are able to create a narrative that works together.

With insights into this potential for future discontent evident in Nicole's private thoughts, this ethnographic encounter suggests that security-mediating practices can be relatively mundane from the outside. They can be the types of negotiations that happen alone and tacitly. As they are always present within our own thoughts and practices, these experiences can be conjured verbally when needed, such as in defence of a particular way of life while approaching a future with a partner.

Clutter and the Past

IN THIS NEXT EXAMPLE I again consider cleanliness and clutter, but turn away from shared households to a single adult living alone. For Russell, in his mid-forties and a homeowner, keeping clutter at a minimum is a means to mitigate his 'anxiety.' This experience is tied up in how he has decided to live his life in relation to his upbringing. Russell lives alone, with his dog, and has what he describes as a very active social life in the city—he is often organising friends to go to music shows or the theatre events, bars and restaurants, the beach, and other events. He describes this lifestyle as being a product of his upbringing. He explains that he had a sister that he never knew who was struck and killed by a car when she was seven and that this cast a shadow over the family. His older brother has told him that before her death there 'was love and laughter and fighting' but Russell himself remembered growing up in a very 'antiseptic' and 'business-like' household where everyday life felt 'very formulaic.' Whereas he felt lonely as a child, Russell now desires to have lots of friends and do lots of things. Russell's identity is thus very much tied to his family narrative

and social networks, and when he describes his anxiety, he also wraps it in the same family/friends framework:

> I'm a high anxiety person. I stress. I keep it very—I'm very much like my dad, I love to laugh, I like people, but I'm also—I tend to be someone that people confide in, or talk to, look to for advice sometimes, whether its financial or personal—and I just absorb a lot of stress and I create a lot of my own stress. It affects my sleep sometimes, like last night…. I think that doing all the activities [that I do] helps to relieve that, especially when I do physical, like working out.

I ask him if he finds that being alone in the house can increase his anxiety.

'Yeah… I'm investigating that,' he begins. 'I've learned how to do mindfulness meditation, so that's helping a lot with just like being present and understanding what I'm experiencing other than the anxiety. I love animals, that's helpful.'

'Do you think that your relationship with your anxiety affects how you live in your home?'

'It does. Yeah because clutter makes me anxious and I don't like clutter at all. I will hide clutter, and that helps…'

He also finds that other people's houses and cars, if they are cluttered, can be upsetting to him as well: 'I don't preclude myself from doing things, but… I'll be in there as long as I need to be, but I don't want to be. Maybe it just increases my stress level and I just suck it up, I don't know.'

He later shows me his 'hidden stuff' under the bed in his guest bedroom (Figure 3.5). 'I got stuff down here that I don't want to just pile somewhere but I don't know where to go with it,' he explains, pulling out a pile of things from under the bed. 'I got the Charlie Hebdo—I got two of them while I was in Paris—you couldn't get them in the US and I scored two of them... and I've got other stuff down here that's important stuff.'

Thus, although Russell feels the need and desire to have an active social life, he

describes himself as sensitive to the moods and material worlds of other people, which can add to his anxiety. He responds to his anxiety by keeping a mostly clutter-free home, storing sentimental things without a place under his guest bed.



Figure 3.5: Russell's hidden clutter



Figure 3.6: Billy's kitchen

Preparing for the Future, Connecting to the Past

IN MY FINAL ethnographic account in the home of another single adult, I return to preparation for the possibility of future insecurity via the material storage or food and water, and relay how family and past experiences are intertwined.

Almost everything in Billy's home is well used, and when I comment on this, he says 'yea, I don't really have anything nice,' later describing his home as 'utilitarian and very rugged.' And yet, as an artist in his mid-thirties living alone, Billy's apartment is aesthetically designed and everything has both a place and meaning: from animal bones hanging against a muted green paint in the kitchen, to cabinets housing jewellery, hatchets, and other trinkets. 'I really am a big fan of finding new ways to connect a lot of interests,' he explains to me in relation to his possessions and décor. Included in this décor are a variety of 'weapons'—mainly knives and axes (Figure 3.6).

'I just want to talk about [the weapons] for a second,' he told me thirty-seconds in to our interview, 'because I'm sure it's really easy to paint me as a crazy person.'

I laugh. As I was introduced to Billy by a trusted friend and had been in his house before, his 'weapons' were expected and not even particularly obvious, but rather blended into the aesthetics of his house.

He begins by describing how he thinks that paranoia is a 'hereditary mental trait' that runs in his family, and although no one else has been diagnosed with it, he says that he has been diagnosed by therapists at different points in his life, adding that drug experimentation has also induced paranoia and so 'it's really hard to say.' Regardless, paranoia, weaponry, aesthetics and family relatedness are entangled for Billy:

> My father has a very prepare-for-the-worst-hope-for-the-best outlook on life and the world and so his relationship with things like weapons and war is because he was

> in the army… I was raised on weapons and war… so on one level it's just kind of something that was passed on to me… on another level it's how I cope with what some person might define as paranoia or the really negative forces in the world—you know, I think in my lifetime I'm really going to see some social turmoil and unrest and having weapons is how I cope with the stress that that gives me. And then on another level… there's the aesthetic and engineering level of how I appreciate weapons. Knife making is something I've started to dabble in- primitive weapon making is something I'm really interested in. It just fascinates me, the relationship of humans to weapons… so I would consider myself a responsible weapon owner.

The aesthetic and engineering qualities—which also involves knife throwing—are described as both 'meditative' and a way to reconnect with his father as an adult. Billy's relationship with his parents has been strained over the years because he took a life-path they did not fully agree with. Where his parents are 'conservative,' Billy went to art school and has full-sleeve tattoos that he still, at 34, hides from his parents when he goes home. Only recently has he begun reconnecting with his parents. Billy describes this as in part a product of his own age and becoming 'more conservative' himself, but it comes up most in relation to his attempts to start a design-build business. This entrepreneurial, do-it-yourself quality is something his entire family immediately backed, and they have jumped on board to help him pave his own way. Billy explains to me how he built a knife-throwing area in his parent's back yard and that his father has enjoyed this pastime.

When I asked Billy a question I asked all households: 'If you had to leave your home in a hurry, what three things would you bring?' Billy does not answer with the same thoughtful pause and practical answer (usual answers were wallets and computers). Instead he smiles, then gets serious and says, 'um, my meticulously prepared bags.' He brings me into his bedroom, moves a piece of fabric hanging from the wall, and opens a hidden, locked cabinet. He pulls out a 'big duffel bag full of food and water' and explains that there is usually an axe strapped to it (but he had to use it for something) and that there is also a gun

in the cabinet.

Billy has several 'go-bags,' one in his car, one in his studio, and this one at home. 'I spend a lot of time preparing for different scenarios,' he explains to me. He says that his ideal scenario is that he has adequate time to prepare and can put water, weapons, and food into his car. 'I try to pay attention to alternative radio, alternative news, reading between the lines of mainstream news—to get out of harm's way before it happens, before it turns into absolute chaos,' he explains. 'If I have five minutes and I have to go out on foot, that changes.'

'I know where to come in a blizzard!' I joke.

'Yeah, it could be something as simple as we lose power in a blizzard for two weeks. What the fuck would people do if they couldn't get food, water, and don't have heat, you know?'

I do know. Food stock and weaponry are very familiar to me having grown up in rural Connecticut, where Billy is also from. Blizzards and ice storms are the practical reason cited for this stock. My father keeps a generator mainly to sustain a freezer full of locally sourced meat if there is a long-term power outage—a near-annual occurrence. Many of the men I know hunt, and some of the women too, and many consider themselves 'responsible' weapon owners—which means that they are legally obtained and locked in safes. Weapons are generally used for hunting or protecting livestock, and their existence is defended under the desire for security. Living in a city, these types of practices are far less common, particularly as weapon ownership is more associated with crime or protection against crime instead of provisions and survival in the isolated country. This knowledge puts Billy's beliefs in a particular context for me and no part of the visit was unnerving.

Following this introduction, we discuss his love of textiles, his struggles to build his

own design-make business, and issues he's having with a member of his band. Overall, Billy is a very matter-of-fact style of person, and he explains his weapons and go-bag to me with clear self-reflection and consideration for alternative narratives. Does he suffer from diagnosable paranoia? Possibly, but he says he could argue this out with a therapist, recognising that there are negotiable lines between extreme worry and a diagnosable condition. Ultimately it does not matter, because Billy's go-bags are really about an embodied experience of feeling prepared, and like his interest in weapons, are intimately tied up in family histories, politics, self-identity, and aesthetics. His survivalist mode of existence is in part an aesthetic desire to 'live off the land' (in conflict with his fear of the woods at night), in part a way that he renegotiates his relationship with his father, and in part a means of managing an uncertain future.

DISCUSSION

PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES to insecure circumstances are experienced above through embodied interactions within the household. Chloe's complex experience around food, intimacy, and America is both articulated to Bruce and myself, as well as tacitly explored over the course of the year. Michelle and Sean approach the potential for insecure circumstances through food stock and provisions, and Rachel find a general sense of security from food stock.[21] Attentive to his wife's happiness, Adam sees her need for security as a viable rationale for overspending on groceries. In Trisha's house, we witness a reconstructing and securing of familial relations after transition through screen time. At Nicole and Claudio's Providence apartment, we see Nicole [un]consciously maintaining clutter to avoid

[21] While food stock is highlighted herein, many participants also reported saving or investing money.

the unknowns of a future self, reminding us that uncertain futures are not always negative; indeed, the very idea of any type of change, good or bad, can evoke anxieties. Obsessive decluttering becomes a way for Russell to mitigate his anxiety, which is very much related to his sense of being both alone and with others. For Billy, reflections on his relationship with his father, aesthetics, and preparation for an uncertain future are intertwined.

Also evident are the transitional, mutable qualities that accompany many of my households. Chloe's readjusting to the US and her new life in Providence is a contentious point in her relationship with Providence-native Bruce. Trisha and her family are readjusting to a new, post-divorce circumstance. Nicole and Claudio are adapting to the changes that come with a shared life together. These transitions are in the background of their household experiences.

As everyday practices involve a reciprocal exchange between the body and the world (Csordas 2011), the experience of transition is often embodied. The management of the disruption transition causes can thus be played out through further tacit interactions with the material world or articulated through the body. Fatigue or anxiety might emerge, eating habits might be changed, and sleep can be affected. Ultimately, household members are faced with new challenges and possibilities for restructuring everyday life, which they must negotiate between other household members (or visitors to the home) and within the capacity of their material environment.

I use insecurity to frame some of the experiences brought on by disruption, the potential for change, or past disruptions that fostered change. The vignettes highlight two types of insecurities. The first is material insecurity, which in this selection of households exists more as a threat than an everyday reality. Michelle, as the only adult working in her young family, recognises that she is relatively financially stable, but that some months it does

come down to the dollar. A carefully constructed budget, particularly around feeding her family, is important to its basic continuity. Food insecurity is recognised to have intergenerational effects (Chilton et al. 2017). In their study of obese mothers, identity, and class, Warin et al. (Warin et al. 2008) describe that participants of a lower socio-economic status often 'recounted biographies of food insecurity, poverty and neglect; experiences that profoundly affected the ways in which food and nurturing now featured in their own families' (102). While the intergenerational influence of Michelle's food storage is briefly recounted in terms of a 'left over Depression-era anxiety about food,' she did not report food insecurity in childhood. However, Michelle did work in social services and advocacy and had a lot of second-hand experience with homelessness and food insecurity. She recognises her embodied experience as something different from food insecurity 'defined as a form of economic struggle that includes the lack of access to enough food for an active and healthy life' (Chilton et al. 2017:1). Rachel's 'sense of security' also did not stem from childhood, but rather highlighted a desire to have healthy food and sustenance readily accessible. Together with Chloe's account of food anxiety interlaced with her relationship, these households shed light on the entanglement of embodied experience and food that occur even in the absence of histories of food insecurity. They reflect a general insecurity around the nourishment of the body, and to what extent nourishment is possible under their circumstances, which are often outside of their control—such as the US food system, a pay check, or the trajectory of love.

The second type of insecurity—the embodied sense of not feeling 'secure' which an individual feels—is thus interlaced with material insecurity. This aligns best with the notion of ontological insecurity, which attends to how destabilising circumstances that are not consistent with an individual's sense of the world can cause an embodied experience of

insecurity. The mutability of Bruce and Chloe's relationship, for instance, challenged Chloe's sense of coherence, as did her move to Providence to be with him. Participants such as Rachel likely learned that certain everyday necessities help sustain their ontological security. Fresh food, cooking, and nourishing her family were things that gave her meaning—their interruption would be temporarily destabilising and so Rachel mitigated this through having a well-stocked refrigerator. Trisha's family provided insight into how divorce and death can challenge one's sense of coherence. Everyday habits of care needed to be re-established and technology as a coveted object became a means through which temporary connection could be found.

Both material and embodied senses of insecurity also have a temporal element. The imagined potential for change—such as Billy's fears of a declining world—and impending change—such as Nicole and Claudio's upwards social mobility—suggest a possibility of either material or embodied insecurity in the future. According to Russell and Trisha, past experiences can also have a lasting effect on their embodied needs and desires.

The insecurity described herein offers the first building block in what everyday uncertainty is. Insecurity ultimately involves the lack of basic individual needs, which can be both collective and biological, in the sense of food, and subjective. Material insecurity is uncertain because supplies are not certain. Ontological insecurity exacerbates uncertainty because it is an experience that challenges what is known.

Subjective notions of insecurity are also deeply relational. Individual experiences often permeate the household. Several of these vignettes reflect on the anxieties that come with the fractures of love, such as with Bruce and Chloe's on-the-rocks relationship or Trisha's children's desire for maternal connection. Social relations can be preserved at the expense of the individual body, such as Chloe sacrificing her nutritional interests to create

more harmony in her relationship, or in benefit to the individual, such as Adam surrendering his financial concerns in favour of taste and nutrition. Ultimately for both, familial solidarity is what's at stake. Even for the four adults living alone, sociality is highly present, from social events within and outside of the home to contemplating past and present relationships with friends and family (as seen with Billy and Russell above). Learning how to live with others in the world—and how to be alone—were common preoccupations, resonate with Bellah et al.'s (1985) earlier findings about the tension between individualism and community in America. The data presented also support the notion that the management of uncertainty—even everyday uncertainty—is caught within social relations (Cooper and Pratten 2015; Jenkins, Jessen, and Steffen 2005; Berthomé, Bonhomme, and Delaplace 2012). These findings also connect to Hemmingson's (2014) insight that inharmonious family dynamics can exacerbate the stress caused by insecurity in low-income households.

Social relations can be challenged and restored through conflict with household objects, such as with Trisha and her children. Nicole and Claudio explore the uncertainties of their joint future through conversations about clutter; Russell responds to his sensitivity to human stress and messiness by creating a clutter-free home; and Billy re-maps his relationship with his father through an interest in weaponry. Once again, this data supports the notion that the material is inextricable from the interactional dynamics of uncertainty (Jenkins, Jessen, and Steffen 2005; Cooper and Pratten 2015; Berthomé, Bonhomme, and Delaplace 2012). On the one hand, certain material absences can give presence to felt senses of insecurity, as in the case of food stock in Rachel's kitchen. On the other hand, material presence can also exacerbate things like anxiety or worries about a partner's health, as described with Russell or Chloe. Things are also used as part of coping strategies (Jenkins, Jessen, and Steffen 2005), with can be as blatant as Billy's go-bag to cope with his fears of

the future or integrated into everyday habit, such as Chloe's emotional eating to cope with her circumstance. The negotiation of uncertainty takes two distinct temporal forms: it can have a bandage effect, applying a temporary solution to mitigate unwanted feelings, or it can be a part of everyday practices that assuage senses of insecurity over time. Overall, attending to senses of security in the home involves the effective negotiation of the self, materials, and others—a failure has implications for the future harmony in the self or home.

CRITICISM OF THE US 'materialism' has long accompanied a culture of consumer capitalism (Whybrow 2005). This chapter pays attention to the objects embedded in everyday social worlds as sources and metaphors of meaning. This attention to detail in the American home is necessary to highlight that accumulation of 'stuff' can be deeply entangled in self, family, and history; it is not solely economic. Regardless, the capitalist discourse of consumption creeps into the home, particularly through technology. Roger Silverstone et al. (1992) describe how:

> Information and communication technologies make the project of creating ontological security particularly problematic, for media disengage the location of and action and meaning from experience, and at the same time (and through the same displaced places) claim action and meaning for the modern world system of capitalist social and economic (and moral) relations. (17)

Within the households I studied, participants were often conscious of and resistant to consumerism (differentiated this field site from others discussed below); Chloe's difficulties with returning to American food are evidence of this. Regardless, all still engage in consumption.

The link between materialism and insecurity lies in the inherent quality of there either never being enough or the potential for material loss. No socio-economic class escapes as these qualities are weighed according to perceived circumstance: a comparing and

contrasting between the haves and the have-nots. Thus, it is inequality, not material deprivation, which drives insecurity. In the introduction to their ethnographic volume, *The Insecure American*, Gusterson and Besteman (2010) highlight insecurity as a dominant theme in American ethnographies, particularly those that describe both political-economic insecurity and the anxieties embedded within our responses to the uncertainty of the neoliberal state. Of interest is the 'insecurity' of the middle class, which highlights the continuum of insecurity from basic food and housing insecurity throughout market liberal regime. For Rachel Heiman (2015), who studied middle class households in New Jersey in the 1990s, 'middle class security can vary significantly' depending on the greater political and economic forces at work (5). While the middle class fears falling deeper into economic crises, the lower classes bear the burden of neoliberal precarity, including the unreliability of 'treating healthcare as a commodity' (Gusterson & Besteman, 2010:12). Many suggest that this increased sense of insecurity is related to neoliberal, post-Fordist society, where jobs are no longer secure and left to the whims of the neoliberal free market.

Additionally, Judith Butler (2004) and others have described the ontological insecurity, existential experiences of fragility, and felt qualities of threat associated with politico-economic circumstances in the US, particularly after 9/11 and the economic crash of 2008 (Neilson and Rossiter 2005; Massumi 2005). For many, greater political or economic uncertainties emerge from events in the 'cultural memories' of mass-scale trauma, hardship, or mourning (Connerton 2007). These are events that can rock the stability of the nation-state on a variety of scales, but ultimately on an affective level. Butler suggests that 9/11 sparked a sense of vulnerability and precarity that is rooted in the very 'radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty' that constitute American ethics because they were 'disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part' (xiii). Under these

conditions, 'no final control can be secured' (xiii). Butler's perspective notes the friction between US individualism and the global world, where American notions of self-responsibility precludes its people from recognising the relationality of global conditions. The 'injury' of 9/11 reminded the US populace that 'there are others out there on whom life depends' (xii).

Such experiences—9/11, economic insecurity, and encounters with unknown others—only exacerbate the sense of risk, which is often intimately attended to in the everyday environment of the home. Buck Rosenberg (2012) underlines that while the home is increasingly viewed as a sanctuary in a world of risk, or a space of 'ontological security' in a world of 'ontological insecurity,' neoliberal strategies of personal responsibility are increasingly integrated into home life via 'lifestyle experts,' or professionals that describe how one should live, encountered through television or the internet. Such attention to personal responsibility can only exacerbate the anxieties associated with risk (Crawford 2006; Lupton 2013). On the neighbourhood level, anthropologists have written about the literal and non-architectural 'mechanisms of 'gating'" (Heiman, 2015:32) and the 'desires for safety, security, community, and "niceness"' (Low, 2010:31) that accompany inhabitants. While these communities might assuage fears of crime, the desires for community are not necessarily realised in everyday life (Low 2010).

By threading insecurity, intimacy, and the material culture of the home together, this chapter establishes other mechanisms of security that are at work in the home. These mechanisms do not necessarily serve to protect inhabitants from the outside world, as with fences and gates (Low 2010), nor do they necessarily respond to the ontological insecurity inspired by globalisation, politics, or technology (as discussed above). Rather, they shed light on the enduring power of intimate social relations, which both mediate and exacerbate

senses of uncertainty at multiple scales. They are not always about the fear of the other, but also the care of both the intimate other and the self.

In the next chapter I consider three households in depth, examining the ways that storytelling and biography factor into home-based research about uncertainty and wellbeing. These vignettes continue to provide reflection on the making of the self and sociality in the American context. They also provide insight into what types of narrative responses to uncertainty help promote wellbeing.

Chapter Four - Narratives of Adaptability, Adaptable Narratives: Biographies, Meaning-Making, and Uncertain Circumstances

INTRODUCTION

THIS CHAPTER considers narratives—including biographical narratives and narrative co-construction of meaning—in relation to the management of uncertain conditions. Whereas in the last chapter I focused on participants' responses to embodied experiences of insecurity, which could spark uncertainty about the continuity of their selves, in this chapter I focus on *circumstances* of uncertainty in the past, present, and future. While narratives factored into the last chapter, I concentrated there on material to shed light on some of the ways that uncertainty is negotiated within social and material relations. In this chapter, the material and social are still present, but I instead focus on the role of narratives in the cultivation of self and family.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, I draw a parallel to illness narratives in medical anthropology. The chronicity of uncertainty requires the individual to face large existential questions over time, which parallels the experiences of chronically ill patients (Kleinman 1988). Additionally, the need for patient narratives under 'expert' medical care (Kleinman 1988; Mattingly 1994) mirrors Cooper and Pratten's (2015) observation that narratives are necessary in uncertain times: the two offer individual agency under influences of power, be they the medical profession or structures of inequality. Biographies can also highlight the 'contingencies of life trajectories' (Cooper & Pratten, 2015:13): the unfolding of

a life that led to one thing or another and participant thoughts on what might have been. Biographical framings can thus provide anthropologists insight into current constructions of reality, from lifestyle choices (Warin et al. 2008) to the making of new moral selves (Mattingly 2014b). I recognise that biographical telling is not solely verbal: new selves can be reconstructed through everyday routine (Mattingly 2014a) and decorative changes to the home, such as a new placement of furniture (Garvey 2001).

The focus on current uncertain conditions—experiences that are acute and chronic, banal and traumatic—offers insight into how participants frame experiences of uncertainty over time in relation to the present. The uncertain conditions addressed range from the momentary disarray of a thunderstorm to the circumstances created by marital separation. I describe how these events sparked reflection on the past and future. These encounters provide insight into how participants frame their current life situation, their pasts, and their potential futures, which in turn relates to how they respond to uncertain situations. I use these ethnographic encounters to discuss three significant types of narrative structures associated with uncertainty: uncertainty provoking, narratives of adaptation, and adaptive narratives. These will be revisited in the discussion.

The vignettes in this chapter also reflect some of methodological complexities of how narratives emerge during participant observation. While interviews offered an initial window into a participants' sense of self, the stories that emerged over time were emplotted differently within different contexts, so that only over the course of the year was I able to develop a more robust account of participants' life stories in tandem with their everyday practice. Conversations, outside of interviews, were reciprocal and took different form in different households, dependent often on how the participants related to me. They were also firmly implanted in situations: recent visits to family, preparations for events, or ongoing

chronic conditions that required periodic revisiting.

In this chapter, I consider three households where extensive participant observation took place, particularly to attend to narratives over time (as opposed to interviews alone). I first write of Joyce, recalling when an unexpected thunderstorm left us in conversation about family, relationships, and death. Her biographical accounts offered insight into how she attended to a chronic uncertain situation at work. In the next vignette I consider how a recent marital separation and subsequent break up with a new partner left Trisha reflecting on histories of magic in her family. Magic and divination became a way for her to negotiate the unknown in the past, present, and future. In the final vignette I explore one family's experience around IVF and what their co-production of narrative revealed about their beliefs and future aspirations.

NARRATIVES AS INTEGRATING AND CONNECTING

JOYCE AND I STAND in her living room in mid-July, discussing an assortment of common topics, which most frequently include her dog, a two-year-old purebred who gathers compliments on his well-groomed coat everywhere he goes, and the ups and downs of relationships, including a recent visit to her son and daughter-in-law's family. I have been taking care of Joyce's dog in her absence, and tired from the weekend, I hope to leave quickly. The weather, however, has another plan.

'Why is water pouring from your roof? I exclaim, startled by an alarming flood of water streaming from the roof. Joyce looks at me, confused.

I go over to the window and open the shade: it is pouring rain, quite suddenly, in the way that summer storms creep up in the Northeastern summer heat, torrential and quick, so

that if I were to go out in it, I would be soaked between the porch and my car parked just across the street.

'Have a glass of wine,' Joyce encourages, 'you aren't leaving in this.' She promptly turns towards the kitchen. 'I saw that you have single malt scotch," she says en route.

I laugh. 'I've been stressed.'

She nods in agreement, the unspoken exchange between us harkening back to an earlier conversation about how she likes to have a beer or glass of wine after work, especially now that she is doing the work of two employees during a transition period.

'Is white wine in a box okay?' she wonders, 'unless you prefer your scotch.'

'The wine, please,' I say, reaching down to pet the pup. She pours me a glass and we sit in her living room on two chairs, the dog excitedly jumping between us.

'So,' she begins. 'Are you dating anyone?'

The uncertainty of my romantic future provides a connection through which Joyce shares advice and insights from her own life. Much of Joyce's life story was discussed in our first interview, which set the groundwork for future conversations. One narrative thread that wove throughout our interactions was how Joyce lost 'the love of her life' and the accompanied advice that I needed to find a man 'who worships the ground you walk on.'

When she first met him, in university, he had been married and she engaged to another man. She refused to be alone in a room with him, she told me, without really understanding why. After her engagement ended and his marriage was in decline, Joyce and her future husband finally coupled up. Joyce gave up a career in medicine to raise a family with her husband, who wanted to be a lawyer. Although she spoke of this decision with some regret, it was always outweighed by the importance of love and family. Twenty years into their marriage, when they were in their mid-forties and their children were teenagers,

Joyce's husband died of Leukaemia.

In the unexpected conversation that this July thunderstorm provided us, we spoke of love, marriage, death, and career, setting the course for regular visits that would unveil new components of Joyce's life history over time. On this visit, I learned that Joyce's first son drowned when he was two years old—a story which, unlike losing her husband, would be rarely repeated. On our next I learned that after her husband died she went back to school to be a physician's assistant, but dropped out when her daughter developed extreme anorexia. I knew from our interview that Joyce moved her family to Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of New England where the family spent their summers, about two years after his death and after her daughter had been hospitalised several times, because she 'decided we needed a change':

> I said [to my daughter], do you want to move to the Vineyard? And she didn't say 'that's ridiculous.' She was entering her junior year of High School. I called my Father-in-Law, it was his house, and asked if we could move there, so that she could finish High School there. And we did. And it saved her life.

On the Vineyard, Joyce got into a ten-year relationship with a 'very wealthy man' that she described as 'emotionally abusive;' she explained how grief, her daughter's struggles, and the need for financial support were all intricately wrapped up in her decision-making of the time. Eventually, Joyce left the relationship and drove to Providence. *It all happened so fast*, she said. She found her current home and moved in within the week. She explained to me that she felt like her husband was watching over her.

In late September, I joined Joyce on Martha's Vineyard, taking her dog across on the ferry on a windy day after her daughter's wedding. Joyce was excited that I would now be able to meet her family, so that her stories had context, and for some months after she would refer to our trip to the island when things about the family came up. The three days I spent with Joyce gave me a more robust account of her life history—as shared and discussed

by one of her closest friends, Laura. Together, we recounted Joyce's life story with Laura's own memories and input, revisiting some of the many traumas Joyce faced: an ectopic pregnancy, the death of her son and husband, and her emotionally abusive relationship. While Joyce's narrative did not change, Laura added depth, reminding Joyce of particulars she had forgotten. The conversation, littered with serious moments, was filled with laughter, as Joyce and her friend were so clearly happy with the present state of affairs: a vacation on the Vineyard after Joyce's daughter's wedding. Even the rainy, stormy weather of the wedding day was described as being 'actually perfect' for dramatic photographs, and ceasing 'just in time' for the ceremony.

At one point during our visit on the Vineyard, Laura leaned in to me and said: *Resilient. That's the best word to describe Joyce. She's incredibly resilient.* Laura described how Joyce still found joy in everyday life despite her difficulties. It solidified what I had already noticed about her: Joyce's incredible ability to adapt.

THE UNCERTAIN SITUATION in which this vignette begins—a thunderstorm—is banal and not particularly noteworthy, something a researcher could easily miss. Yet, as Ingold (2008) notes, weather is a core part of human entanglement with the environment, effecting people's 'moods and motivations, their movements, and their possibilities of subsistence, even as they sculpt and erode the plethora of surfaces upon which inhabitants tread' (1802). Weather is thus a part of our world-making and ties us to the past, present, and future through the turn of the seasons and the desire to predict the unexpected. It is arguably one of our first early experiences of the everydayness of uncertainty: a child is fearful in the thunderstorm because of the loud noises and flashes of light, but also because she does not know what is happening or what the outcome will be. In the present vignette

the rain offered an even more banal uncertainty: how and when would I leave Joyce's house and get to my car?

Joyce's response to pouring rain was to accept it: we weren't just going to wait out what was likely to be a ten minute downpour, we were going to embrace the unexpected weather and have a glass of wine and a good conversation. This is a simple event, but her response to it mirrored the same acceptance in which she now approached her traumatic history. I learned something from her in that moment, and in staying to visit that day: life is short, and it's worth pausing under the unexpected to drink in its pleasures—a shared conversation, a glass of wine. The pause also brought with it a reciprocal human connection: I received her advice about how to best re-approach the future and she received my non-judgmental ear.

Joyce's tendency to see the good in difficult circumstance was evident in her first interview, also around the weather. What started as a memory of the difficulty of the previous winter became a story about a joyous encounter with her dog:

> It was awful. It was the worst winter in my memory. And I have to thank God that I had a really warm down coat. And I got over my dislike of hats in a big hurry. My mom actually bought me this coat, it doesn't have a hood, but it has a fur neck, which kept my neck warm. And it was wonderful. And I have boots, I spend a lot of money on boots, I have really good boots that are waterproof and warm. And it saves me. We walked a lot in the wintertime even though it was zero. And the colder it is, the better he likes it. And I put mushers on his paws, and he was perfectly fine. Perfectly fine. Loved it. He went digging in a snow bank, it must've been at least five feet high, and he was digging and digging, and I was like, what are you looking for. He came out with the frozen bagel. (Laughs) He is such a food hound, he knew that there was a bagel in there, and he came up with that. Of course I took it away from him, but he was so proud of himself, he came up with a bagel in his mouth and was prancing around with his bagel in his mouth. Frozen. He's something else.

The weather, of course, was only a banal uncertainty. The more chronic circumstances of uncertainty regarded her work, family, and later, her home and health. For

much of fieldwork, Joyce was kept on the fence about whether or not she would be hired into her same position, as a high-level personal assistant, after her boss left and a new one came. Although she had been working there for five years, the office interviewed others and kept her in the dark about the internal conversations for several months. During the transition period, Joyce was doing the work of two employees, working longer hours for less pay. She told me that, more than ever, coming home to a glass of wine was a necessity. Joyce eventually got the job, and higher pay, but the stress heightened again after her aging brother had a fall that winter. As Joyce's mother and brother rarely spoke, Joyce was left to care for her brother, both physically and financially, driving to five hours to New York regularly to help him. Her mother drove her crazy, and her brother could be stubborn and difficult, but Joyce relied on visits with her children, especially her daughter's family, who she enjoyed, visited almost every other weekend. When Joyce spoke of encounters she was not sure how she felt about, she would repeatedly the words 'bizarre' or 'really weird.' Her job experience was bizarre, encounters with her children's families or her mother might be 'weird.'

When I was leaving the field, Joyce filled me in other her two latest uncertainties. First, she was diagnosed with osteoporosis. *Me!* she exclaimed, *the healthiest 65 year old you know!* She couldn't believe it, and the routine of supplements that would follow. Second, her landlord wanted to sell her condo. Joyce deeply adored her home and the thought of losing it had her debating buying the home. *Oh*, she added casually, *and two of my friends died this week.*

We had dinner that night, for our final interview, and I asked her how she dealt with all the stress she faced that year:

> I drink wine. I'm totally over the—I eat what I want, I drink what I want. I'm not overly obsessed with dieting or any of those things. The most wonderful thing that I do is walking the dog, you know all of that. If I didn't have a dog I would be doing yoga. So the fact that I have a dog is huge in my life, he gets me out. And I read a lot, I binge on Netflix, I'm getting my PhD in Netflix (laughs) in the wintertime.

> That's how I deal with it.

She later explained further:

> I don't feel like I have any other option. When you lose everything, you just have to be grateful for what you have. I don't lose sight of how short life is for very long, only because my husband died when he was very young, and I had a child die. So I can get caught up in all that for a while, but then I say – I have a perspective. I get to see this beautiful day. I got to walk my dog. I get to read. I get to enjoy a glass of wine. And I'm not going to stress about gaining five more pounds, or not going to the gym today. I look at people and say you could not be here tomorrow. You know so, and I wasn't always that way, but I'm getting a lot better at it.

Thus for Joyce, having perspective on life was key, although she recognised that this is something she had to work towards or 'get better at.' This work was both in concrete actions: she left her unhealthy relationship, found a home she loved, and got a dog; and in philosophical engagements: she learned to forgive to herself, for instance, and not worry about that extra glass of wine. Adaptation, resilience, and acceptance were qualities that accompanied her throughout her life.

NARRATING HARDSHIP

TRISHA PULLS A BLACK Armani dress out of her closet and hangs it across from where I am sitting in the living room. *This is the first year I can put this dress to use,* she prefaces to me, and then explains that the dress had been bought for a wedding at the height of a chronic sickness in her twenties, when she weighed 95 pounds and was sure she was heading towards death. Tomorrow Trisha is headed to the funeral of a friend's father, one of over seven funerals she has attended this year. This heightened number of deaths combined with her recent loss of weight after a marital separation, a breakup with a new boyfriend, and her depression, has meant she can fit into this dress again. By bringing this dress out and sharing

this story with me, the dress became a metaphor for what she really wanted to tell me. *I'm not well now*, I heard from that story, *just like I wasn't well when we bought this dress.*

Trisha has recently been overwhelmed with grief and accompanied depression triggered by breakups and death. Her first foray into romance after her marital separation recently ended. It turned out that the new boyfriend had been seeing someone else. The reminders of the boyfriend were consistent, as her boyfriend's children and her children were close friends. Here the culprit iPad emerges again as Trisha's three children ran downstairs to ask if they could Skype with his children, handing her the iPad. Trisha glances from the iPad, to me, to her children and tells them 'another night.' Sensitive to his mother's low spirits, the eldest hustles the little ones back upstairs.

Trisha asks if I want a glass of wine—she has not had many of late, but feels like she needs one tonight. She's called me because she is having a particularly difficult time, and hearing her in tears on the phone, I offered to come over. Once we are settled on the couch, the children upstairs and the wine poured, Trisha shows me a new tarot deck that she bought online. *I don't know how to use it,* she explained, asking me to provide some insight. We looked through the cards, noting the images, and then decided to do a reading, using an online guidebook to learn what each card meant. After she shuffled the deck, asking a question about her recent relationship, she lay out three cards in between us, one each for the past, present, and future.[22] As a practice of 'reading the cards,' candles and silk often came in tandem, as well as the sensuality of feeling the cards, shuffling with intention, and

[22] The tarot are a deck of cards with four suits of fourteen cards which vary by deck (e.g. cups/chalices, coins/pentacles, swords/knives, wands/staves) composing the 'minor arcana' and 21 cards composing the 'major arcana.' The latter contain cards such as The Fool, The Hanged Man, The Devil, Death, and The Hermit. The deck draws on symbolism and metaphor in its divinatory purpose; for instance, Death is about transformation, not literal death. The decks used were traditional reproductions, New Age classics, or new decks drawn by artists (these are popular items in trendy urban boutiques in the US as well). As my experience with the tarot stretches beyond fieldwork, many participants were interested in reading the cards with me; their buying of their own decks or awareness of the tarot emerged prior to my involvement.

admiring the images. While the tarot were read with scepticism, they were taken seriously and regarded as sacred, even amongst those who were unreligious.[23]

Trisha noted at first that the central card of her reading had an image of a lotus, a symbol that she associated with her grandfather. She told me that her grandfather was 'the magic' of the family—a story I had already heard in parts in our first interview. Trisha's family was from India and her parents had both left to come to the US, where Trisha was born. In India, there was a family legend about how an ancestor stumbled on a Brahmin meditating in the woods and the Brahmin put a curse on her family: only two members of the male line could be alive at the same time. She said this had been true. Her grandfather told her mother, when she was a child, that he would die by falling. As a teenager, Trisha had two premonitions about the accident that would cause her grandfather's death. While she doesn't remember it, about a year before she told her mother there was no reason to go to India next year, but did not provide an explanation. Later, she recalled coming home from school in tears asking her mother what was wrong. 'It took about a day and a half for the news to get to us,' Trisha explained to me, 'but my grandfather had fallen down the stairs in India, um, and he broke his hip, he recovered from the hip surgery, but caught pneumonia in the hospital and eventually just had a heart attack and went.' Trisha explained to me that she had predicted other things before as well.

In the middle of our Tarot reading and her story about her grandfather's death, Trisha's mother called. *She knows I'm doing devil's work*, she said of her Christian mother as she picked up the phone. The call was to report yet another death, a family friend.

MY VISITS WITH TRISHA, as with Joyce, involved significant life history narratives. In

[23] As this contrast illustrates, some households were actively a part of an organised religion and others were adaptive in their spiritual beliefs, drawing on different cultures or the occult.

the vignette above, various aspects of her life story emerge from the objects in the room: first the dress, then the Tarot cards. While the issue at hand is her most recent breakup, much more emerges about Trisha's past from my visit than regarding the breakup itself. Trisha emplots her breakup into past experiences of uncertainty and illness.

The circumstance of uncertainty at hand lies in the precarious nature of love and relationships, which only exacerbated her current depression. While this same uncertainty of love offered a creative space for bonding between Joyce and I, here it became a difficult and unruly venture marked by anxiety. I want to draw attention to love's inconsistency in coping with household disturbance. While intimate relationships can provide significant support through periods of transition, they can also increase experiences of uncertainty (Bruce and Chloe in the last chapter are a good example of the ups and downs of this tension). The uncertainty of love—both in current troubling relationships and in the unknowns of future coupling—was evident in many of my single participants. Many desired the safety and care of intimate connection, but they were hesitant about things like losing their independence, having another broken heart, or dealing with 'unnecessary bullshit.' This echoes the observation that while the home is a space where the life of the other is engaged (Das 2010) and practices of care enacted, it can easily become unhomely with the arrival of the unexpected, shattering 'intimate aspirations' (Mattingly 2014a; Das 2010). As Judith Butler (Butler 2004) notes, the vulnerability of the human body and self—in the potential for grief—makes sociality inherently risky. Thus, a common facet of 'everyday uncertainty' is the uncertainty of love.

Trisha's brush with the uncertainty of love was only a part of the many anxieties of that year, which clearly sparked significant emotional and embodied experiences. Trisha collapsed much of her emotional experiences under 'depression.' When I asked her in an

interview why she felt depressed, she reflected on her current situation and the past:

> 'It started with friends dying. It's more connected to all the things out of my control. I also think it's like a valid—like I need to be depressed? I think it would be ridiculous if I wasn't. But I think throwing the separation in—like family is very important to me, so after cohabitating for three years it was very upsetting and sad for me to finally be moving apart. And like having that concrete—our family isn't a family in the traditional manner anymore. I mean I think we've made steps living close to each other […] but it sucks for me to not have the kids everyday. That was a decade of my life. And they were the thing that, you know, well I'm not doing research science [like I planned to before children], but I have these wonderful people in my life they're not the replacement dream, there like a different dream that's just as fulfilling, so like to not have them every day really fucks with me, on top of doing this work that is so – like I can't say that it's meaningless …

Here she speaks of her current job working as an online administrator. She recognises from her work that she has a good social network that can help her succeed in life, but also that her job is far from what she planned to do. Thus although it is not meaningless, it feels unfulfilling:

> It's not even that I'm overqualified, it's just that it's so far away—what I was supposed to be doing at this point in my life was being at the forefront of research on climate change and like making a difference. If I had never had children, that's what I'd be doing. I'd already have my PhD at this point. But getting ill fucked all that up. So there was definitely this point of like, I'm not ill anymore but now I have these children.

For Trisha, what ultimately derailed her ambitions was becoming chronically ill in her twenties with a mysterious, unknown disease and then, once she was better, having three children. While she explained that no one really figured out her illness, it was assumed to be 'auto-immune.' Trisha explained that she thought it was potentially hormonal because she believes becoming pregnant saved her. Before she became pregnant, she was in treatments in the Mayo Clinic[24] and both her and her husband didn't think she'd live out the year. Here, she recalled having chemo during a teaching day and one of the doctors saying 'and these are her ovaries, which are still viable, so we cannot give her too strong dose for too long.' This

[24] A renowned medical care and research practice known for it's work with cancer.

was only two weeks before her surprise pregnancy. She spent her entire pregnancy assuming that either she or her child was going to die, and that it has taken until fairly recently for her to accept that they are both okay (her son recently turned 10).

Although nothing was ever framed as a regret, Trisha seemed to consider her failed aspirations at much length, blaming first her illness and then having children for not pursuing them, despite considering pregnancy to have saved her life. While her depression was triggered by things that were out of her control, mainly the death of several friends and her dog, she seemed to suggest that her lost dreams and current family struggles could have been somehow avoided had she chosen a different life path.

Mattingly (2014b) draws attention to the slow, 'painstaking process' of narrative re-envisioning after life-changing events, which can take place over many years; Trisha's work is only just beginning. While she is able to begin to re-envision her self-identity by drawing on histories of magic, re-envisioning family life is extraordinarily difficult. As Mattingly writes, 'family re-envisioning is most intimately bound up with the gradual reshaping of home routines' (88); with Trisha's home still in disarray after her move to a new home and her body fatigued by depression, routines have been difficult to re-establish. The incident with the video game on the way to piano lessons described in the last chapter is was a part of the slow work of re-shaping routine: how will houses be chosen in this new arrangement? In the uncertainty of this new life, Trisha's first tool was her biography—her current life had to be emplotted within it to make sense.

Biographies and beliefs are a part of cultural resources through which a secure home can be constructed (Silverstone, Hirsch, and Morley 1992). During difficult moments, Trisha draws heavily on her biography and beliefs, which is littered with stories of magic, unexpected consequences, and fractured relationships. While most events from the past

remain outside of her control, Trisha's narration of her magical abilities—centred on the gift of sight and healing others—are core to her agentive identity. While she expresses her inability to manage basic daily routines due to severe depression, loneliness and fatigue, she counters this with stories of a supernatural ability to care for others. These stories describe her as someone who is capable and caring, who could have been something else if given a different life path. They also offer her comfort during uncertain times. The tarot, and the narratives of magic that surrounded it, allowed her to take part in imagining a new future that was integrated around a core familial identity. While the cards helped her envision a possible new future around love, the work was ultimately already being done in her own mind. The use of magic in the management of uncertainty well documented throughout anthropology (Jenkins, Jessen, and Steffen 2005; Evans-Pritchard 1976). Where magic can temporarily assuage feelings of uncertainty, the discourse of blaming something outside of one's control can also exacerbate uncertainty (Graeber 2012).

NARRATIVE CO-CONSTRUCTION IN THE PRESENT

SOME NARRATIVES, particularly oral histories are 'composed' within greater cultural narratives and an awareness of the audience (Summerfield 2004), bridging disconnects between the individual's experience and cultural discourse. However, when frameworks do not fully account for an individual's experience, narratives must be constructed and invented, often with the help of others (Reimer and Leslie 2004; Kaufman 1998). Examining how narratives are emplotted in conversation is a way to uncover 'existential negotiations' and 'stories-in-the-making' between two or more actors (Mattingly, 1994:821). Even in the interview processes itself there is a 'tension' and 'slippage' between 'self-identity and the

shaping of (collective) household identity' (Reimer & Leslie, 2004:192). This particularly emerges between couples, who will negotiate and contest their experiences even in the interview. In his study of couples and laundry practices, Jean-Claude Kaufman (1998) found that 'couples have less and less frameworks on which to model domestic behaviour' (210) and thus must invent their relationship, and consequently their shared futures. He notes that 'conjugal fables' are constructed to 'restore [ ] coherence' (11) and his methodology of interviewing couples both together and separately reveals how narratives can change. I use Rachel and Adam's household as an example of narrative co-construction around a period of uncertainty, where cultural resources, new perspectives, and intimate negotiation are drawn upon to sustain stability over time.

RACHEL AND ADAM, both in their mid-forties, live outside of Providence with their two-year-old toddler, Dylan. They have negotiated a lifestyle where he works full-time while she teaches part-time, mostly at night and on the weekends, and takes care of their son during the day. I spent the most consistently regular time with this family because I took care of Dylan 2-3 times a week and was an active participant in the everyday practices of care and household changes over the course of several months. I thus go into greater detail in this section on their period of uncertainty, sparked by the decision to have a second child through in-vitro fertilisation (IVF). Their experience, like Trisha's, was littered with unexpected disruptions.

Having met in their early forties, Rachel and Adam had Dylan through IVF. They said that they had hoped for twins, at the time, because the procedure was expensive and they knew they wanted two children. Now, several years later, insurance no longer covered the procedure because Rachel was over forty-four, an age when the statistical chances of

success were quite low. Rachel decided to have the viability of her eggs tested. I took care of Dylan while she drove to the clinic in Boston and when she came back she was in low spirits. She took off her shoes and came to sit with us on the floor.

How did it go? I asked tentatively, not sure if she was up for speaking about it.

Not well, she responded, explaining that statistically for her age there was a 0-1% chance of fertilising her egg.

Are you very upset? I wondered.

Rachel's eyes welled up. *First I was enraged. Now I am feeling teary.* She explains to me that she thinks that her eggs are healthier, and that they are going to have them tested next week to see if that's just 'hubris.' They said the next option was an egg donor, but Rachel noted that that was really expensive and a whole other conversation.

Have you thought about adopting? I asked.

She explained that that too was expensive (up to $10,000).

Four days later she told me that she had tests done that morning. She was disappointed because she thought she would know right away, but it would take another week and a half to receive news. Rachel expressed that she was having periods of tears and periods of anger, but that she knew she was going to be okay no matter what happened.

The weekend away with my family was good, she explained, *because I got to meditate and appreciate how lovely my son is, and that he alone is a gift.*

That week, Rachel returned to a state where she had previously lived to teach a workshop, and visited with old friends. When I saw her again a week later she had not heard about the test, but she seemed in much better spirits. *I put it in the back of my mind and I'm feeling better about it*, she explained.

Another ten days went by where things (from what I saw) ran smoothly, then, in late

September, the toddler fell, twisted his arm, and had to be taken to the emergency room—it turned out to be nothing more than a ligament twist, but Rachel, who was not with Dylan and Adam when it happened, was shaken.

Ten days later Adam texted me: *Any chance you're around today? Rachel is ill and may have kidney stones. I want to drive her to doctor or hospital and would prefer not to take Dylan if at all possible.* While they ended up deciding not to go, I saw them the following morning. Rachel said she felt better.

Adam responded: *Do you? You look brighter.*

That day I took Dylan to the park on the bay, a ten-minute walk from the house, and one of Dylan's favourite places. It had a playground with swings and slides, a pier where people fished, and a rocky beach littered with beach glass where Dylan liked to throw stones. When we returned, we blew bubbles on the front steps and I taught him how to say 'gargantuan' when we made a large one. This was sort of typical play in the household. Every time I greeted Rachel and Dylan, they were sitting somewhere or another in the house or outside, engaged in an activity and talking to one another. Rachel smiled when Dylan said the word 'gargantuan,' but I could tell that she was struggling, and she said she was still nauseated. Rachel's usual laugh—which is joyous and engaged—was uncommon during this period.

In tandem with Rachel and Adam's adult concerns, Dylan began to struggle with 'separation anxiety,' in part because of the introduction of a new babysitter (not myself). Rachel reported asking her 'mommy friends for advice,' realising that it was a phase. She explained that the best thing to do was reassure him that she loved him and would be back, but not draw out the goodbye. She had read that allowing him too much choice regarding *when* she left would actually cause more pain and anxiety. By mid-October, Dylan finally ran

to greet me when I arrived for the first time since summer. Rachel appeared stressed.

I am so glad you are here, she said as I took off my shoes. The day before the house had smelled of fresh-baked muffins and felt warm and cosy; today it seemed fragmented, with laundry unsorted and toys strewn about.

Are you stressed about Dylan's birthday party? I asked, which was going on that weekend.

She shook her head. *I just need to feel like I have my own life back for a few hours.* That morning, Dylan had not napped and had had a big tantrum and didn't eat much. While Rachel ran errands, I took him for a walk in the stroller and he fell asleep.

When it came to these daily trials, Rachel had a lot of patience. During the course of the year, I rarely heard her raise her voice at Dylan like many others do during periods of stress; the exceptions involved Dylan continuing to persist with dangerous play. If she does not meditate, she once explained (for instance, when Adam was sick, she did not get her morning quiet time), she noticed a 'huge difference' in her level of patience with him. For both Rachel and Adam, daily meditation was vital. The highs and lows of daily life—dependent on time, tantrums, sickness, and sleep patterns—came in waves that lasted anywhere from a few hours to a few days. The IVF procedure was more like a haunting in the house, existing 'in the back of her mind' or appointments on the calendar, sometimes called to the fore as life ebbed and flowed.

It was not until the first week of November that the IVF process came up again. I came to the house in the morning because Rachel was hoping to leave the baby with me while she went shopping for clothes. She was in good spirits and Dylan has just woken from a nap. He was on the enclosed platform next to the kitchen counter where he could stand and play or eat while she cooked. After a brief conversation about her hair, she picked up a bottle of vitamins and said to me, *I'm just starting my pre-natal vitamins today!*

I looked at her, surprised. *Really? So it is happening?*

It was. She had started taking the pill a week ago and had an appointment tomorrow to solidify the schedule. It turned out Rachel was fertile enough, but the 'bad news' was that they think she has phased out of insurance coverage because of her age, so they only have 'one shot'.

What is it, $20,000?

$15,000. Money we don't have. But we have a mortgage and a credit card… perhaps implying that they were used to monthly payments or that they would take out a second mortgage.

Will your families help?

My family doesn't have the money and Adam's has already done a lot for us. So we only have one shot, she said again.

Rachel explained that she was trying to make herself as fertile and healthy as possible. In addition to 'the pill' and the prenatal vitamins, she said she was on a strict diet, and that she was seeing an Ayurveda practitioner who was going to give her recommendations for herbs/spices and essential oils that would help. Then she suddenly looked at the clock. *I'm in such a mood to just hang out and chat. Look, already fifteen minutes have gone by!*

By mid December, Rachel told me that they were successful in fertilising one egg and that they would find out on the 20th if it stuck via a pregnancy test. She showed me a picture of the egg cells. This picture remained, throughout the following week, on the lap of Buddha figure seated against a bright blue backdrop on their household altar, which was prominently in a corner shelf near the dining table.

At this juncture, I had much insight into how they sustained wellbeing through the daily habits I witnessed in the home: regular meditation, keeping the house clean, making

sure the refrigerator was well stocked, eating together. Spirituality also served a role in managing the uncertainty of the future, as suggested by the photograph of the fertilised egg on the family altar. Their spiritual practices were very much informed by independent histories of Buddhist practices. Rachel practiced Buddhist meditation for many years and Adam had lived in a Buddhist community for nearly a decade. Meditation, regular rituals around the household altar, prayer, and chanting were core to their life as a family.

THE IVF PROCESS ULTIMATELY FAILED, and only a week after, Adam had surgery for his snoring (because 'harmony in the home' is important, he told me) and Rachel had another kidney stone attack. *What a crazy month this is!* she commented when she told me about the stones over the phone. *So many procedures!*

What strikes me about their story is not that they moved on, but rather that they made room for the failure, allowing the sadness to be both expressed and shared, and ultimately, okay. In our closing interview, I reflected that Rachel and Adam tended to handle things well, particularly with the IVF disappointment, and asked if they had noticed any changes in their relationship or home life. They waffled slightly at this observation, with Adam reflecting that their communication had shifted and Rachel reflecting that her sex drive had fallen since the kidney stones. But they weren't worried, they assured me.

'I think your question kind of like implies some sort of normalcy or regularity in relationship,' Adam tempered, continuing:

> and I don't think that's something we expect really. Like ebbs and flows, the energy comes and goes, things happen, but they feel very surfacy. And like down beneath the surface it feels very stable, not really shaken. […] It was only when you listed off everything, I was like, oh that sounds kind of dramatic, but it's not like, oh no here is another thing before we can process through the thing before. But things happen and they disappear... it comes it goes... I'm usually more concerned about periods of boredom or dissatisfaction at work.

They agreed that the IVF conversation was still not over—that there was the option of going overseas to have a cheaper procedure, but that it was 'bookmarked.' Rachel added, becoming teary at times, that she was just trying to get her life and health back on track before they talked about it again. She would do this by cooking good meals and enjoying time with her family. *I know that conversation is coming,* she reflected, *I just don't know when.*

The key thing here is that both Rachel and Adam knew the conversation would happen when it needed to, on its own timeline. That was core to their intimacy as a couple. Rachel reflected:

> One of the things that I think deeply helps both of us, but that I didn't actually articulate, is that we talk to each other. We talk to each other every single day, and if we miss a day we make sure we do it the next day. And if we missed too many days, I don't feel very good. I don't feel-- my inner scaffolding is a little off, you know. So, you know, he had a rough day, so, we talk about it. And I think that is so so important. I've searched many decades for a person that I can communicate with as well as I do with Adam. And I feel that's one of the biggest keys to me feeling as steady and solid mentally as I do. Because I have someone who actually, you know, sees and experiences me at my best, or when I don't feel at my best, or when I can't locate it, he does on some level. Even if I'm pissing him off, it's there.

Adam offered a different insight, noting that it was not primarily communication, but his sense of purpose, that helped inspire what he called 'resiliency:'

> 'I feel like I have a life purpose. And to me that's the biggest thing. And I feel like she has a life purpose, that not only parallels mine, but together we create this bigger synergy. And we can put everything in that framework, like even how we view what we're doing with him […] So if the house burned down, I mean it would suck, and we go and visit her parents, and we would have to take the hit of being around people who are not comfortable in their own skin, so that's hard. But it's like, we're there, and we have the togetherness, and we have this greater purpose, and we can even talk about the hardness of that within. […] My inner space is the sort of prime space where I learn resilience, and I live with at least one other person that does that. Maybe two.'

Here Dylan—a co-constructor of meaning in his playful, sometimes exasperating toddler presence—offers an ironic interruption: 'Not this one, not this one, not this one,' he repeats.

RACHEL AND ADAM, like Trisha and Joyce, also draw on the cultural resources to attend to their experience of uncertainty. Meditation, spirituality, and communication with one another all come into play during their prolonged engagement with a medical technology. While they occasionally spoke of their past, Rachel and Adam's attention was in the present moment and towards the future.

Like Joyce, Rachel and Adam were preoccupied with constructing the good life. Their aspirations, apart from the IVF, were modest, focused on enjoying one another, good food, and the freedom to pursue careers they both loved, even if it meant less money. I return to Fischer's (2014) observation that the good life is defined by three non-material, subjective qualities: the 'capacity for aspiration as well as the agency and opportunity to make realizing aspirations seem viable;' 'cultural valuations of dignity and fairness;' and commitment to a larger purpose (5-7). Rachel and Adams most ambitious aspiration is their desire for another child. As Fischer explains, 'opportunity structures,' which include social norms and legal structures, bound what aspirations are possible. For Rachel and Adam, insurance would not cover the procedure, but there were ways to make it happen through their own means. Thus, although their aspiration sparked uncertainty, making it happen was *possible*, although not probable. The culture they exist within—an alternative health oriented, creative class in New England—also offers support, particularly in offering supplements, prenatal massage, and a variety of other 'alternative' methods to help Rachel. Because of this culture of support for unconventional choices, dignity and fairness are very much a part of their immediate lives. Adam directly addressed their commitment to a larger purpose, which for them is a spiritual path that offers meaning in their lives.

I argue that what ultimately made their wellbeing sustainable when their ambitious pursuit failed was their reliance on one another and well-rooted, more achievable aspirations.

The ability to co-construct a narrative of their lives *as it happened* made them incredibly resilient individually and as a couple. This narrative relied on core beliefs about what constituted the good life: connection, communication, and a sense of a higher purpose. These beliefs were not easily shakeable because they were adaptable to changing circumstances. When things fell apart—here the failed IVF—their response was to step back and re-engage their modest aspirations. Rachel focused on getting her health back on track and enjoying time with her family in whatever capacity was possible. They weren't worried, the ebbs and flows of life were to be expected, and all they really could do was ride them, together.

DISCUSSION

IN THE THREE households above, I draw attention to biography, story, and conversation as resources in managing uncertainty. Laced within these narratives are extensive, individual belief systems that either draw on cultural and familial histories or adapt external belief systems. Life histories emerge from and around present experiences of uncertainty and help the researcher learn about choices made in the present. Joyce's story situated her present actions in a longer narrative of tragedy and accomplishment, where she was capable of confronting the unknown and adapting to it, particularly through the 'hard work' of constructing the life she wanted. This involved self-care and self-forgiveness for her faults and failings. Trisha's story describes a greater struggle to find grounding in her current life. She draws heavily on her biographic history in a similar capacity to Joyce; rather than being about the self's ability to adapt to change, however, Trisha's identity is centred on a magical or healing ability that can attempt to fix or mend the wounds caused by change. As a

tool, this biographical framing offers her a resource through which she can begin to re-envision her new life. Rachel and Adam give insight into the creative capacity of communication within a marriage or partnership. They are able to communicate some of their experiences to one another, co-constructing a story about their lives and potential futures. When tragedy strikes, Rachel and Adam return to their modest aspirations for a good life, focusing on health and diet, togetherness, and trust that things will unfold as they need to be.

Certain narrative patterns were observed that were evident in other households. The first is the temporal quality of the narrative, both in how the story took form over time and in how much they drew on the past. Both Joyce and Trisha had a fairly rigid narrative style that drew on life histories: the story was emplotted similarly in each retelling, holding distinct form and plot over time. I was not a co-constructor of meaning, but an audience for the story. However, Joyce's narrative had more malleability. I saw that she was willing to negotiate it with additional memories added from her friend and when I prompted her with unexpected questions. Trisha resisted my questions, more often returning to the main plotline of her worldview. Rachel had a malleable style of narrative that relied on the present moment and future more than the past. While a basic structure was in place, she co-constructed her narrative when additional experiences or information was found. Her immediate family was a key component of this co-construction. They also integrated me into their narrative co-construction, asking my opinion and integrating my ideas into future conversations.

Connected to this temporal quality is the level of aspiration laced within life narratives—a second narrative trend. Although Joyce drew heavily on her past, she was also looked to the future. *Do you know what my dream is?* she asked early on. *I want to retire and move*

to Portland, ME and work a few days a week at Whole Foods. Rachel and Adam too looked forward to future travel plans with their small family, now that another baby would not be on the way. Trisha's narrative, at least as it was told to me, lacked significant aspirations or hope for her future, and was marked instead by the inevitability of constant let downs—from struggles with her children to failed friendships. While again, it is impossible to really compare these households, the self-reported level of wellbeing was higher in Joyce's and Rachel and Adam's homes, suggesting that the 'capacity to aspire' (Fischer 2014) is indeed vital in securing wellbeing in the home.

Some participants were effective at retrospectively changing past aspirational narratives to fit life's unexpected turns. Paige's story of love, for instance, shifted after her fiancé broke off their engagement. Paige was in her early thirties and the unexpected break up threw a wrench in her future plans. She set about renegotiating her life. While with her ex she was undecided about having children and a staunch vegan, after the breakup Paige began to speak about the importance of finding someone who was good to her and desire to 'nest.' She was willing to adapt her diet and lifestyle to fit these needs. With a new boyfriend, Paige came to eat cheese and oysters, negotiating his non-vegan diet in their meal plans and exploring on her own. She also began to see her relationship with her ex under different terms—while she recognised that she was in love with him, she now saw the relationship as toxic and felt her new partner was a better match.

The third trend involves how the self is constructed as an agent under uncertain times or periods of hardship. Trisha constructed herself as someone that bad things happened to, but whose agency was found in her ability to know these things through her magical ability. Joyce and her friend saw Joyce as someone who was resilient, adapting well to the difficulties that life presented her with and taking control of those things she had

control over. Rachel and Adam's combined narrative is about adaptability through togetherness and personal meaning. It is about knowing that if things fall apart, they will be able to maintain a stable connection to one another and to a 'a higher purpose' that always lay 'beneath the surface.'

The fourth trend surrounds the integration of belief into empirical experience or scientific understandings. All three households draw heavily on belief. Joyce described finding her current home as a serendipitous experience that was guided by her dead husband. Rachel and Adam drew on Buddhist philosophies to provide a basic framework for the life they wanted to construct together. Within this, they show a tendency to integrate scientific understandings—gathered from encounters with technology, education, and conversation—into their belief systems. Trisha's magic, for instance, was at one point described in terms of the body's ability to take in all the details of its surroundings, much like a computer. Rachel and Adam understood that the failings of the IVF might be a part of a stronger spiritual path.

I argue that narrative styles can thus provide a framework for how people approach the everyday—much like a subjective worldview—drawing on the power of the story to integrate the past, the future, agency, and the unknown (belief) into the present, which is a story-in-the-making. Each framework has consequences for the everyday. I suggest that Trisha's framework is uncertainty producing because it implies that the unknown will occur and that it will be difficult to deal with because of past experiences of loss and trauma. Joyce's framework is uncertainty mitigating: it accounts for her capability to managing change and work towards wellbeing. Rachel and Adam's framework creatively responds to uncertainty as it integrates the necessity of everyday improvisation.

THE ABOVE OBSERVATIONS draw out two topics related to uncertainty: resilience and adaptability. Resilience was a term I heard sporadically throughout fieldwork. While not as common as the words potential, possibility, and hope, nor stress, anxiety, and burnout, resilience factored into some discussions—such as those with Rachel and Adam or Joyce—that regarded people's ability to withstand hardship. From a social-ecological perspective, resilience is defined as 'the capacity to absorb shocks and still maintain function' as well as 'the capacity for renewal, re-organization and development' and 'the degree to which the system can build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation' (Folke, 2006:253;256) after the experience of disturbance, often traumatic or catastrophic change, or 'conditions collectively viewed as adverse' (Ungar, 2004:342). Some anthropologists have been critical of definitions of resilience that do not attend to the dynamic quality of everyday life (Fabinyi et al. 2014). Adapting to change is clearly a part of resilience, but as the ethnographic accounts in this chapter suggest, adaptability itself is dynamic and entangled in the past, present, and future of everyday social and material relations. Adaptability is perhaps better understood under Ingold and Hallam's (2007) notion of 'improvisation' as an everyday act.

In building towards my wider argument about the making of new American futures, I want to draw attention to the slippage between the necessity for human improvisation and the assumption that the individual should adapt to precarious circumstances under late-capitalist regimes. While social-ecological resilience attends to the resilience embedded in a complex ecosystem, the notion of resilience has been adapted to organisational and institutional dynamics, where dealing with uncertainty and change require flexibility (Folke 2006), and to individual psychology, particularly amongst at-risk youth (Ungar 2006). These trends somewhat mirror the observation that under the neoliberal cultural economy, the individual must learn to adapt quickly to an ever-changing environment, including the

precarity of the free market economy (Martin 2007; Lemke 2002; Looser 2012). In the meantime there is a rising awareness that the individual alone cannot possibly cope with the global consequences of the free market, especially when it comes to non-communicable disease and climate change. There is thus conflict—and everyday anxieties—over what constitutes individual agency.

Are the notions of resilience and adaptability evident in the households explored in this thesis products of the American neoliberal cultural economy embedded in a distinct local history or are they better framed as habits of improvisation? I propose that the term 'resilience' is culturally digestible, evoking the American values of self-reliance and adaptability. Within the homes that value 'feeling-talk' (Ortner 2003), resilience can stem from emotive insights into one's past, thereby highlighting individual qualities. I hesitate to say that this is problematic for people like Joyce or Rachel and Adam, whose selfhood is valued and grounded in social relationships. Being resilient means they have come through life's difficulties well, and will survive again. This individual trait also does not preclude inter-reliance. Rachel and Adam consciously recognise that 'togetherness,' communication, and a sense of 'greater purpose' contribute to what makes their household resilient.

The problem of resiliency emerges under the conditions of class: I understand the middle class households in this research to have the material capacity and social network necessary to foster so-called 'resilient' qualities *and* maintain reasonably good health simply in their access to health care, proper nutrition, and adequate housing. In the US, the expectation that the individual should take care of his or her self and survive against all odds is rampant (I return to this as it emerged in my fieldwork in Chapter Six). Most of the participants in my work understand this notion to be problematic, if not false, and yet they lived their lives in ways that embodied what Crawford (2006) terms middle class 'healthism.'

He warns that 'the ideological effects of the redefinition of the problem of health to lifestyle and solution to personal responsibility should not be underestimated' (409). The ways they were not taking responsibility for their bodies often had to be articulated, such as Joyce's not worrying about what she drinks and eats. In Rachel and Adam's household, responsibility to the health of the body was paramount. Yet, if I were to take this observation back to them, I know that they would say: but what else can we do?

Instead of being critical of how embodied notions of self-responsibility emerge in the middle class, to then be valued and propagated by public health institutions or city developers (Guthman 2011; Crawford 2006), I want to return to the notion of storytelling. I ask: what role does storytelling in the home serve in filtering, understanding, negotiating, and taking part in American ethics of self-responsibility? Previous scholarship highlights that attending to the making and telling of stories is vital in disentangling (and re-tangling) the personal and political (Ochs and Capps 1996) and that the household forms a crucial place where narrative meaning-making is constructed (Mattingly 2013; Mattingly 2014b). Ingold reflects that people and things are not just relational, they are themselves entanglements: 'a tissue of knots whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other bundles, make up the meshwork' (Ingold, 2008:1806). As this chapter has explored, stories are both entangled in the everyday, exchanged and constructed between friends or family, and are entanglements themselves, tied up in the past, present, and future, the real and the imaginary. Stories are a part of the meshwork of culture and therefore have resonance in processes of cultural reproduction in the home and the maintenance of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Thus, within stories are the embodied, semi-conscious ideologies of culture, such as a particular New England self-reliance and the expectations of neoliberalism. But there is also dissent: an emergent ecological consciousness that binds people to local

communities (see also Chapter Six) and narratives of togetherness that inspire household resilience.

The ethnography herein suggests that while participants are a part of the cultures in which they live and grow up, their stories are mediated by the necessity of improvisation, particularly around stories of love and loss. Their intimate attachments to others and the pain that follows separation or failure emerge as primary threads in their biographic tales. Further still, their stories attach them to others: to myself, a new person in their lives, or to their partners and children. When these attachments fail, there is isolation, as Trisha finds in her struggle to explain her breakup and depression to her children. As discussed in Chapter Three, the story emerges between them through household objects and the reformulation of routine more than from a verbal telling.

The three households above, with their varying experience, led me to think about how the sharing and trading of reflexive narrative frameworks, amongst friends, partners, and across generations, potential contributes to a household's ability to mitigate adverse circumstances or periods of uncertainty, and move towards wellbeing. A distinction can be made here between performative talk ('feeling talk') and actual everyday practice. While Rachel and Adam might appear to embrace a specific type of talk more than the other households, they also lived what they spoke of in practice, whereas others desired a certain way of life and could articulate it, but had trouble putting their desires into action. By considering 'the story' to be a multi-sensory experience that links individual biographical narratives with other people and the material environment, I propose that both intergenerational (to children) and inter-household (sharing with me) possibilities emerge in a story's (co)construction.

A link between resilience scholarship and narratives offers some insight into this

potential. Stephen Barthel et al. (2013) explore 'social-ecological memory,' or 'the combined means by which knowledge, experience and practice of ecosystem management are captured, stored, revived and transmitted through time' (1325-6). They argue that while advances in industrial food production have 'eroded collective memory of food production,' (1321) allotment gardens can help establish and maintain social-ecological memories. They write of how both verbal and material exchanges are passed between members of the community and across generations, related to the development of shared understandings and memories. In an allotment garden in Stockholm they speak of 'physical objects in the gardens, exchange of seeds and recipes, mimicking of bodily practices, self-enforced rules and a semi-annual magazine.' The home too arguably contains 'social-ecological memory:' the everyday methodology of *how to live* with uncertainty is 'captured, stored, revived and transmitted through time,' with material and verbal exchanges passed between members of the household and across generations.

I argue that stories are one component of a complex web of interactions that transmit knowledge. They are part of how household members learn *how to live*, particularly as social beings. In the American context, this sociality is wrapped up in individual accountability. While this cultural facet is easily criticised for its ignorance of larger structures, it does offer insight into how adaptable narratives, narratives of adaptability, and narrative co-construction help US middle class households find wellbeing, and how these methods of living the good life might be inter-generationally reproduced apart from the obvious benefits of economic security.

I finish this chapter by drawing attention to the sensory capacity of storytelling in the home and its methodological importance in attending not just to uncertainty, but also to wellbeing. Stories are often shared and co-constructed and thus offer an auditory experience

in the home. In their sensory capacity, they move the methodological function of narratives beyond the discursive. The repetition of stories, words, and the values interlaced within them are heard in the home, and thus are a part of the everyday experience of the home, for both inhabitants and guests.

In the following chapter, I turn away from uncertainty to focus on the cultivation and sustainment of wellbeing in the home space. I use the concept of atmosphere to elaborate that wellbeing is constructed from more than just social and material means: wellbeing over time also draws heavily on the 'in-between.' Things like cosiness, lovingness, and the sacred become a part of the making of space in the home. I argue that sustaining positive 'energetics' in the home are fundamental to household and individual wellbeing.

Chapter Five - Sustaining Wellbeing: Atmosphere, 'energy,' and intimacy in the home

INTRODUCTION

IN CHAPTER THREE I described how uncertainty could be linked to the past and future even if felt in the present, making it a lingering quality of everyday life. Wellbeing too exists in the past and future, making it sometimes difficult to see and experience in the present moment: a person can appear troubled in a current state, but their experience does not account for long-term judgments about what constitutes the good life (Robbins 2015). Ethnography can elucidate the 'thick temporal middle' where happiness is negotiated both subjectively and socially in the everyday and over time (Robbins 2015). For instance, Gardner (2015) points to how subjective happiness can sometimes be forfeited for the good of the social whole in the long-term, while Iza Kavedžija (2015) describes happiness amongst the elderly in Japan as cultivation of a balance of independence and social relations. Writing of the American context, Whybrow (2005) notes a distinction between individual pleasure and longer-term happiness: 'Together with life and liberty, pleasure is of the individual self. Happiness, on the other hand, is found for most of us within a social context and in the relationships that we have with others' (255-56). The point of Whybrow's text is to show that the individual pursuit of material wealth in the US destabilises community ties, thereby leaving some Americans with an extreme amount of wealth, but also a significant amount of stress. Ultimately, the individual body and self, the social ties that bind, and the temporal nature of wellbeing are entwined together.

This said, in these discussion about happiness, the importance of space and the

subjective or embodied experiences that it can inspire, especially over time, is ignored. This chapter aims to expand on the temporal, subjective, and social tensions described above, by drawing on the concept of 'atmosphere' to highlight that space, mood, and the senses are also a part of wellbeing. The term atmosphere has been used in accounts of domestic space to address the 'in-betweenness' of subject and object, experience and environment, helping to explore what constitutes the 'mood' of a space (Bille, Bjerregaard, and Sørensen 2013; Bille 2013). In doing so, atmosphere attends to materiality, space, subjectivity, sociality, and affect. In what follows I will explore how the cultivation of 'atmosphere' in the homes encountered contribute to wellbeing, both over time and in the moment. I first consider participant usage of the term 'energy' as a quality existing in the space between the body and the other and a contextual means of speaking about atmosphere. I then show how atmosphere also attends to the intangible elements of everyday life that can contribute to a sense of wellbeing, such as evoking divine presence through light (Bille 2017). I argue that the cultivation of domestic space is rooted in a culturally shaped sentimentality surrounding togetherness, which responds to American notions of individuality and self-reliance. I elucidate a distinction between atmospheric 'performativity'—or the intentional cultivation of a desired experience in a space—and the actual sustainment of togetherness and individuality or solitary space over time. I finish the chapter by returning to the notion of uncertainty. I propose that the atmospheric cultivation of wellbeing instructs the body how to negotiate uncertainty in the intimate space of the home, preparing it for negotiating uncertainty outside of the home.

At this point in the thesis—the halfway point—I've shared diverse experiences with everyday uncertainty and have begun to elucidate what certain participants and households have done well, in terms of their effective negotiation of uncertainty and sustainment of

wellbeing, at least over the course of a year. This effectiveness is substantiated primarily from their own reports, but also by my ongoing participant observation in their households. In my interest in continuing to highlight what appears to be working, I also want to make it clear to the reader, once again, that the households were very diverse in their experiences and practices. I have carefully analysed their feedback as a whole, at their different scales of involvement, and come to the wider arguments presented in the following chapters. In making these arguments, I am not saying these were the experiences of all or most households, but rather I am interested in elucidating the experiences that emerge as productive in relation to uncertainty and wellbeing. I am, as always, bound by the limits of the interview and must rely heavily on homes where I spent significant time. To balance this, in Chapters Five and Six I take a different ethnographic style, drawing on shorter vignettes from a variety of households to stitch together overall observations. I try to be clear when experiences are articulated by many versus one or a few.

CULTIVATING 'ENERGY'

IN MANY OF the homes studied, the term 'energy' is used to describe anything from electricity to physical or psychological capacity to the positive or negative feeling of a space, person, or thing. The ubiquity and diversity of the term stood out to me during my analysis of interviews and subsequent reflection on my field notes. 'Energy' was a way that people talked about and understood the subjective experience of a space.

The word energy was often used to describe electricity or the physical capacity of the body. One participant did not like leaving cell phones plugged in because this 'bleeds energy.' He later referenced his 'energy levels,' which 'skyrocket after a really good workout.'

Another participant recognised that her mother's vitamin B12 intake affected her 'energy and stamina.' Another found that drinking less alcohol gave her more energy, allowing her to focus on yoga, which was better for her wellbeing.

Energy could also be a mental or emotional force, similar to Ryan and Frederick's (1997) description of vitality, or the subjective feeling of aliveness. Joyce found that being the only one to take care of her ailing brother 'takes up a lot of energy. Psychological energy.' Several people discussed 'not having the energy' to make changes in their lives. Bruce, for instance, understood that he was no longer thrilled by his work, as he had once been. He compared it to the gym: 'it's like when you go to the gym and you do the same fucking routine all the time, your body adapts to it, and it starts to get boring. That's where I'm at with [my work]. But I don't really have the energy to go where I want with it.' Trisha also repeatedly told me she did not have the energy to tidy her house or unpack after the move, noting that this was linked to depression and that her energy depleted when she found herself alone. Her kids leaving the house was a 'big energy suck.'

Energy could also be used in a similar way to 'personality' or to describe a person's presence. One woman explained that her baby daughter was 'very much a girly girl. That's just her energy.' Another participant referred to his ex wife as 'the kind of woman that took all the energy out of the room. When she walked in every light went to her.' Joyce explained a difference in energetic attraction in her two children, explaining that although she was more like her son, she 'gravitated' towards her daughter, whose personality was more like her husband's and that she was attracted to that 'energy' in her, and wanted to be around it.

Energy could also describe an invisible, moving force. One interlocutor discussed what he called *the flow*, which he first explained as being similar to when a sports player was 'in the zone.' According to him, one could cultivate an awareness and connection to *the flow*;

he felt that when he meditated more, he was more connected. Certain people were more connected than others. This invisible, moving force can also be more embodied. Once, after I had spent a morning with Dylan while Rachel ran errands, I told her that he was quiet and I had bad menstrual cramps so we both had a quiet morning. *That's good*, *you probably had grounding energy for him*, she responded while motioning around her belly, indicating that my period was part of this downward energy.

'Positive' and 'negative' energy were terms also used to describe people, places, and things that participants were either drawn to or repelled by. For instance, whereas one participant above found yoga to provide her with more physiological energy, her partner expressed that yoga 'is a release of the end of the day […] it resets my mind so I'm not bringing home any negative energy from work.' Another found the third floor of a home she was thinking of purchasing to have an odd energy, suggesting that it may be haunted ('bad vibes' might be another way to describe a similar experience). Rachel's husband Adam once reflected that he did not like the 'aesthetics' of Rhode Island, which he described as 'a depressed environment' that made him 'feel heavy.' He mentioned going to the bay, and how it looked beautiful at first, but then you could not go into the water, and there was glass on the beach. 'Just talking very energetically, there's like a degraded quality that permeates everything.' Another participant described different rooms in his home in relation to energy, explaining that he didn't think there were any 'bad energy spots.' While a darker side room was 'not necessarily an energy drain' it did not have the 'really good energy' of the sunny front room where he liked to spend time with his wife. Negativity stemmed more 'from actions,' not the space. He also explained that this home had a 'different type of energy' than their last, and they had recently rearranged their possessions to fit this new energy.

For my participants, the affective use of the term 'energy' is relational and signifies

an affinity for another body, object, or space. When a potential participant reflected to a friend that I 'filled the room with positive energy,' I knew this was because she saw some semblance of familiarity in me; that I was, at least to her, relatable. On the other side, similar to avoiding those with 'strange energy,' another participant found she wanted to spend less time with a friend whose energy felt 'scattered' and not good for her children. In an ambiguous reaction, one participant found that several other participants, and even animals, had 'strange energy,' and I watched her physically stay apart when she met them, saying very little. Soon before leaving the field, a friend told me that he never liked when I left because he noticed a difference in Providence: *It's like just having you in the city makes me feel better, like I can feel all the points of energy of the city and you are one of them.* Thus, even knowing that positive energy sources exist could make a difference in the energetics of the city itself. Surrounding oneself with relations that are positive, or people who have 'a positive energy,' is a part of sustaining wellbeing.

Overall, participant experiences of energy could be good, pleasant, and calm, or disruptive and unpleasant. While the use of the terms positive and negative, or good and bad, to describe energy are dichotomous, energy in practice appeared as ambiguous and malleable. Energy was both of the body, as in physical energy, and of the mind, as in mental energy. It was both physics, in a scientific sense, and a spiritual flow, in a mystic sense. No matter what type of energy was being evoked, it can be either depleted or generated. Without proper management, energy bled, sucked, and dispersed; with proper management, energy invigorated, lightened, and provided stability. Ultimately, energy was a relational and subjective sense that addressed the immaterial, and often ephemeral, experience of a space, person, or thing.

I focus above on the usage of the term in the households studied, but some

understanding of this use can be ascertained from the word itself.[25] As a resource, energy is relevant to how infrastructures function, overlapping with electricity supply, water, technology, and transportation (Larkin 2013). Renewable energy is considered under alternative energy discourses, and has become a part of the imagining of future possibilities for many cities and states (Boyer 2011). In relation to the body, the notion of energy balance has become a primary means through which health professionals discuss diet and obesity (Alexandrou, Tenbergen, and Adhikari 2013). Feeling low energy or not having enough energy to tend to others suggests an overlap between physiology and psychology. Ryan and Frederick (R. M. Ryan and Frederick 1997) describe the subjective feeling of feeling alive, which varies amongst individuals in relation to physical and psychological factors: 'This positive sense of aliveness and energy refers to more than merely being active, aroused, or even having stored caloric reserves. Rather, we believe it concerns a specific psychological experience of possessing enthusiasm and spirit that we refer to as vitality.'

The use of 'energy' to describe everyday experiences of aliveness is expanded through its use in 'alternative healing' or alternative psychology approaches, which resonate in some households in the community studied. McClean's (2005) ethnography of an alternative healing centre in northern England describes uses of the word that reinforce 'positive' and 'negative' experiences of space and people, particularly in an atmospheric sense:

> 'Healers argue that negative energies (spiritual dirt) dispel into the atmosphere during healing […] healers are like magnets: because of their trained 'sensitivity' they can become channels for absorbing other people's energy.' (638-9).

McClean thus argues that the 'twin' discourses of 'blame' and 'responsibility' were central to

[25] The word energy originates from Aristotle's *energia*, which means 'being-at-work,' but did not come into its current form until the nineteenth century and was solidified as general term by Einstein's theory of relativity (Snurr and Freude 2017).

the centre's healing ideologies. Energy as a measure of aliveness, including changing fluctuations in 'subjective vitality,' is easily transposed to other persons, places, and things, which are both blamed and admired for the energy giving or energy sapping qualities. Accompanying self-responsibility, as MacClean suggests, is blame. Resonate with the blaming of neighbours and others for illness and misfortune evident in anthropological accounts of witchcraft, these beliefs take new form in a time and place that values scientific reason and secularism. Today, having 'low energy' or experiencing 'negative energy' often takes the blame for small-scale, unfortunate events, particularly around one's subjective sense of wellbeing. Unlike blame placed on a material object or physical person, the ambiguity of 'energy' allows for creative interpretations of the value of persons, place, and things.

I suggest that this ambiguity also allows for the further subjective sustainment of the boundaries of 'lifestyle enclaves' (Bellah et al. 1985). Energetic differentiation gave permission for participants to avoid certain areas or people and could be considered a non-architectural 'mechanism of "gating"' (Heiman 2015:32). Embedded in their 'feelings' or 'sense' of a person or space were sometimes unconscious cultural judgments. For instance, the energy of one neighbourhood could be negative or depleting, with race or poverty remaining unmentioned. Once, a participant expressed distaste for another participants' energy on first meeting. I read this as a judgment of character—someone not worth her time—more than an actual reality. There was also the sense of infection or contagion. Energy was something to avoid or cultivate because it affected (or infected) the body. One needed to be protected by the right types of energies.

In the following two sections I consider how different households create good or positive energy in the home. I argue that these practices are related to the long-term

sustainment of wellbeing. Spaces or practices that 'deplete' energy emerge as contrary to the sustainment of wellbeing over time, while spaces or practices that continuously or periodically energise contribute to household wellbeing over time. Failure to sustain the appropriate energetics of a home can become quickly entangled in one's subjective sense of unhappiness.

GIVING FORM TO THE INTANGIBLE: DIVINITY, ABSENCE, AND LOVE

I DRAW AGAIN on the home of Rachel and Adam, who I described in Chapter Four as going through a difficult period in their lives, full of unexpected and undesirable outcomes. Their daily happiness was challenged, and I witnessed the ebbs and flows of Rachel's moods as she underwent IVF. In Chapter Four, Adam referenced the house burning down as a hypothetical test of the family's wellbeing. In this thought experiment, he recognised the house as merely a structure that housed their 'togetherness' and 'greater purpose.' However, as I address here, both Rachel and Adam described the 'lustrousness' (Rachel) and 'quality of divinity' (Adam) that their home inspires. The space, in other words, mattered greatly.

The quality of light was one of the main reasons Rachel loved her home, which was small but full of windows on all sides. She explained in more detail:

> 'Houses that don't have a lot of light in, it feels like the energy is just sucking out of you. So I feel like this is infused with a lot of light. One of the things Adam does when comes down in the morning is open up the shades.'

She later explained:

> 'The rooms are conscious, the house is conscious, so you have to help the house wake up […] And if you don't open up the shades the energy is just sagging.'

For Rachel, 'consciousness' highlighted a spiritual element to the house that was not visible, but present, and which must be tended to through basic housework:

> 'I personally think that everything is imbued with consciousness, but it's slow and heavy like a rock is. Until you start to wake it up. Until you start to bring, you know, your love into it. And then it becomes lustrous from the inside. Like I think the space becomes more lustrous when I take care of it, when we take care of it, when it's clean, or when the space is tidy and less cluttered. It's just the space lightens up when we care for it in those particular ways. This area gets more jujufied, um, that's my official word, um, when we are doing puja regularly. When we are meditating regularly and putting the candles on … I think it's a practice of us living our lives intentionally and consciously, and then the house lights up. Yeah, then things have—their specialness shines a little bit more.'

She also described how they had a 'puja, or a little altar, in every room' that functioned as a 'little reminder' when 'the eye catches it.' She explained:

> 'I don't meditate that often upstairs on the bed, but I have an altar there, so when I do, that whole shelf lights up and I see it again. Otherwise it becomes invisible and cluttered and dusty.'

As noted in Chapter Four, Rachel and Adam's way of speaking is somewhat unique amongst the households studied, influenced by Eastern religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) and yoga practice. Their words, however, are integrated into the casualness of the Northeast, and become, in many ways, one of the practices that 'manifest their distinction' as members of a particular class (Bourdieu 1979:169). While the cultivation of atmosphere is in many ways connected to the desire to exhibit taste, as Bodil Olesen (2010) notes the sense of 'something' beyond taste is reflected in 'a focus on the functional nature of the material elements and the sociality which they facilitate' (35), reflecting that atmosphere can also inspire sociality or comfort. It can also be linked to care. In Rachel and Adam's home, I witnessed Rachel enacting everyday practices of care towards the space: regular tidying, placing flowers on the tables or altars, cleaning the floors and counters. She was diligent in opening and shutting the shades, turning on the evening lighting, and making the home feel

'cosy' in winter and 'fresh' in summer. She prepared the evening meal and set it out for her son and husband, a practice that Adam recognised as vital to his wellbeing. Rachel would often apologise when the house was not 'tidy.' While concern about a visitor's judgment is common in cross-cultural accounts of domesticity, I began to read Rachel's comments differently over time. It was not that the house was untidy, but rather that *she did not tidy it*, which meant part of her daily, embodied ritual did not occur. This awareness, either in my presence or perhaps even without it, rocked her sense that the space was as it should be. The 'energy' was off.

PART OF THE challenge of sustaining a 'good' energy in domestic space requires giving presence to a desired mood, experience, or absence. Certain atmospheric practices can contribute to the creation of a feeling of presence. For instance, Bille (2017) describes how the green glass windows in Bedouin homes in Jordan not only emphasise the boundary of the home, but the quality of light cast inwards reminds inhabitants of the presence of god. This presence—or affective reality—is composed of a combination of 'things,' such as the green glass of the windows, and 'half-things,' such as the sunlight that shines through them.

For Rachel and Adam, light was also connected to a sense of divinity. A clean, uncluttered home generated lustrousness while meditation and candlelight contributed to the 'shine' of the home. Adam told me that he is sometimes surprised by the 'quality of divinity in [our home] through the light,' which functioned in contrast to the 'degradation' of their neighbourhood. He felt that it was a quality that he often did not think about in his everyday life, but that he would see in photographs of the home.

Rachel and Adam are somewhat unique amongst the household studied in describing a connection to the sacred through light in their home; they were not unique in

their explicit descriptions of the shift in the energy of a place based on changes in natural and artificial light or practices (such as meditating and lighting candles) that added to a sense of aliveness. Light is 'embedded in visual norms and habits, whereby minor nuances matter, as they change the appearance of the material world' (Bille, 2015:260). Writing of *hygge* in Copenhagen, Bille (2013) also reflects that 'light, especially that which can be artificially produced, is however a particularly effective means of "toning" the visual experience, which does not exclude other sensual modalities' (57). While the role of things and half-things of light—windows, bulbs, candles, lamps, and shades, sun and weather—varied immensely in the homes encountered, light was very much connected to senses 'cosiness' (darker spaces, artificial lighting, fire light) or 'spaciousness' (natural light, open windows, fresh air). The former quality of cosiness could easily become 'cold,' 'dark,' or 'heavy' if it was undesired. Spaciousness could also become 'cold' if the natural elements were fierce: winter, for instance, was more likely to require a balance of natural light and cosy light, like candles or fire. Contrarily, a summer heat wave might also inspire a preference for darkness inside the home, as light generates more heat.

Spiritual practices around space were also evident in many other homes. In her book on material Christianity, Colleen McDannell (1995) argues that American Christians 'want to see, hear, and touch God. […] Throughout American history, Christians have explored the meaning of the divine, the nature of death, the power of healing, and the experience of the body but interacting with a created world of images and shapes' (1). Her account resonates in my own fieldwork, even for non-Christians. Mary—part of a Roman Catholic family—blessed her office space with holy water every Monday, as she explained to me when I came to work with her one morning. She moved from room to room, splashing a bit of the water and saying a prayer. She would soon after play religious music and light a candle. Others who

were less 'religious' might 'smudge' or smoke rooms with incense or sage to cleanse the space, light candles on an altar, or regularly use essential oils in mist bottles as a means of freshening and clearing the air. What participants are trying to evoke by these practices is a change in the energy of the space. For Mary, the material and visual manifestation of God alters the atmosphere. I see this practice as part of the production of spatial energetics in the home and office, particularly as it encourages bodily movement and sensory engagement with the space.

Altars serve a similar function in their encouragement of engagement with a space and with other members of the household (McDannell 1995). Altars were very common in the households studied, appearing in both secular and spiritual forms. Domestic shrines have been found throughout the ancient world and persist today amongst various religions and cultures (McDannell 1995). I define an altar as a surface in the home, perhaps a shelf or a table, that provides a space for visual and material meaning-making to occur, similar to David Morgan's (1998) insight that religious images in the home are a part of the non-verbal 'sensory template' of self-making. Christine and Jack mentioned their various 'altars' in the different rooms of the house, which paid tribute to their ancestors, absent family members (such as their adult children), and past pets. 'The ancestor room' housed a collection of prints from Christine's Native American heritage, and while Christine generally gravitated towards the sunny front room to drink her coffee together with her husband in the morning, which had 'really good energy', she liked being in the ancestor room when it was dark and she wanted to be quiet and alone. In contrast, a wall depicting portraits of their past pets was purposefully visible from the sunny front room where the coffee was consumed. In this way, their past and absent family members had presence in the home, similar to the 'memory walls' described by Grant McCracken (1989) in his account of North American 'homeyness.'

In contrast, Trisha's 'altar,' placed purposefully by the entryway, was seen as a place to put important photos and objects, things that her kids made, and decorate for the holidays or seasons. While the altar was one of the first things she constructed after the family moved, its location by the door and Trisha's ongoing depression made it difficult to maintain (see Figure 5.1). Trisha's construction and later neglect of this space reflected her troubles with rebuilding her family after divorce. While not everyone had a space they called an altar, several households maintained spaces that contained meaningful objects that were described as somehow different or sanctified.

Just as Morgan (1998) describes religious images as non-verbal 'sensory templates' for self-making, I suggest that altars can become sensory templates for togetherness by giving presence to the absent. Christine and Jack's memory wall, for instance, helps display family social connectedness and solidarity, and in this way is a part of the activities, 'enacted roles,' and 'performed relationships' that constitute the North American family (McCracken 1989:175). Christine and Jack exhibited both tendencies towards togetherness and solitude in what their altars, and the combined light of the rooms, imbued. This attention to relationships can also be metaphorical. In her study of religion and popular culture in America, McDannell (1995) describes how relationships with the family can be reflected in how people attend to altars: 'a home shrine is connected to the patterns of relationships in the lives of family members, and those bonds can both nurture and constrain' (35). The changes in Trisha's altar overtime mirrored her struggles to sustain wellbeing in her new home. She ultimately found herself in a chicken-egg conundrum: she knew that having a clean and organised house would help her depression, but her depression prevented her from having the 'energy' to do so. The energy of Trisha's house therefore also became depleted.



Figure 5.1: The same altar, as Trisha's depression continued throughout the winter. Trisha viewed clutter as both the result of depression and an exacerbation of it (photos taken November 2015 and April 2016).

Altars and other spiritual practices are atmospheric because they have the capacity to construct realities and experiences within the home that are not necessarily material in nature, nor easily verbally articulated. For instance, Colleen McDannell (1995) describes how devotional images can 'bridge the gap between the human and the divine because they evoke

emotion in the viewer' (25) and promote personal relationships with spiritual figures. In this way they attend to the in-betweenness of subject and object, and provide a material form for the invisibility of the divine. Similarly, in many of the households I encountered, people wanted to give form to the intangible, cultivating desired energies in the home. Giving visual and material presence to 'love,' intimacy, and togetherness in the home was considered important. One participant had material tokens of love and care throughout her home. In the bathroom, she had a collection of images with quotes, such as this one from Sufi poet Hafiz: 'I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being' and a Spanish quote that translates to: 'I'd love to be your cat, to spend my seven lives with you.' A chalkboard in the kitchen often expressed notions of love and family (Figure 5.2). For Amy and Luke, both in their mid-30s, 'love' was connected to happiness, pleasure and friendliness. When Luke joked that the only 'imbalance' in his life was his 'happy hormone,' Amy noted that 'it was really hard to live with him for the first couple of years... it's a really good mirror when you are with someone who is happy all the time and there is no room for falling apart.' Amy was very verbal about love, frequently addressing her baby daughter with the words 'yes, my love' and using the term frequently to describe positive experiences for herself or her daughter, such as 'she loves loves loves music' and 'she loves people so much so sometimes we invent reasons to go to Target or whatever just so we can push her around in the carriage and she can wave to the public.' These verbal testaments or visual images perform love in the home, which in turn provides a sensorial presence of notions of 'love.' 'Love' emerges here as a sentimentality that needs to be performed in the household.

In contrast, but also providing insight into what a loving home *should* look like, Russell described his childhood home as an 'antiseptic,' 'business-like,' and 'formulaic'

household without laughter. His older brother once explained to him that this sense emerged after his older sister was struck and killed by a car, and that before 'there was love and laughter and fighting.' As a result, Russell was proactive in having friends over for dinner regularly and staying active socially in the city because he wanted more life in his adult home. The reminders of company, such as leftovers in the refrigerator and a stocked bar area he never used by himself, sustained a sense of presence in his home, even when his friends were absent. This sentiment is echoed in McCracken's (1989) account of 'homeyness' in Ontario, where the 'homey' home should be 'open,' inviting, and low risk, attending to sociality through the symbolic and pragmatic organisation of space and things.

Russell's observation of the lack of 'love and laughter and fighting' in his childhood home is significant because it suggests that a 'loving' home needs to have room for conflict, a notion that in some ways challenges the sentimental performativity of love described above. Cultivating an energy of 'aliveness' is something that is important for Russell, but is echoed in other households in the research. Of course, as discussed in Chapter Three, the very things that challenge an individual's sense of security (e.g. clutter) might clash with the desire for aliveness in the home. An energy of aliveness requires room for spontaneity, accidents, mistakes, and disagreement—but on a scale small enough for quick recovery and return to normal structures of security. Indeed, in other homes, there was an expectation of argument in 'healthy' familial relationships. Minor conflict suggests that people are asserting their individual identity whilst attempting to live with others. Similarly, self-responsibility is exhibited through relations with others: one should be aware of other's domestic needs without losing sight of their own needs, and so conflict should emerge, particularly between couples and parents and children, where needs are misaligned. This parallels Olesen's (2010) observation that middle class American homes must also *appear* 'lived in,' displaying 'the

animation created by the very unfolding of social life itself' (36).

In practice, the animation of social life is not easily contained. In my tour of her house, Rose, who is in her mid-40s, described how they were in a long process of remodelling that was consistently interrupted by 'life happening.' 'Life happening' was not just their own busy household, which included caring for four children under ten, but also the inevitable reliance on the contractor doing the remodel, whose son got injured and was in the hospital, delaying the work. Rose expressed to me that she was coming to terms with her house being consistently cluttered as a part of having young children and a full-time job. 'I shouldn't feel guilty about it...' she explained, continuing: 'one of my girlfriends sent me an article, which is about how mothers of young children don't have people come over because they're going to see the most random thing in the living room because my toddler was just playing with it. And how other mothers and other kids usually understand this is just how it happens.' In other parts of our interview, Rose expressed how having a really big family was a core part of her identity, and she laughed gleefully as she showed me pictures and videos of their Christmas celebration the prior year, explaining: 'It's exhausting, but it's a lot of fun. There's a lot of arguments and fights about who's going to do what before we get up to that point [but then] we play music and we do a lot of dancing…' Here again emerges an awareness of the inevitability of argument in a loving, fun family.

In several of the interviews I conducted, couples argued in front of me, but their arguments were generally playful and encouraging. They enjoyed provoking one another and being provoked, allowing each other to assert their independence and then re-establish coherence together. Nicole and Claudio once revisited what was clearly an ongoing disagreement about their bedroom during an interview. Nicole had been talking about how human sleep patterns are affected by the amount of light in our lives when Claudio grumbled

and she said 'I got new curtains for you, baby.' He replied: 'I still love you' and she, immediately ruffled, said: 'You're the one who keeps all the devices in the bedroom. I charge mine out here because I don't want to have—' He interrupted her, saying: 'That's not an issue. I keep my phone in bed and nothing else… but I have actual shades at home…' Nicole sighs audibly, and sarcastically responses: 'In Europe,' accentuating the words, 'they have beautiful shutters that they actually close…' Soon after, the meal continued smoothly, their individual opinions having been asserted for my ear.

Perhaps due to this awareness of the inevitability of disagreement and the hardships of everyday life, several participants were attentive to the importance of daily ritual in sustaining a pleasant, loving energy over time. For Rachel and Adam, the house took on a body-like form itself: it needed to be woken up, tended to, and fed. These things were also shared and maintained collectively, through practices of eating together, allowing space for meditation, and the moon rituals that brought the three of them together with an intentional focus. Many other participants similarly reflected on the importance of cooking or eating meals together (commensality was one of the most frequently cited facets of wellbeing). For Nicole and Claudio, breakfast together was a regular ritual that added to the quality of their life and increased their accessibility to one another in their busy lives. They found that both sustaining regular breakfasts as a daily ritual as well as staging the right atmosphere around breakfast made a difference in their sense of wellbeing together. Nicole liked using cloth napkins to highlight that breakfast was an important meal for them (Figure 5.3). These insights are similar to what Pennartz (1999) describes in Dutch homes, where 'being together in a spatial sense' factors into the 'pleasantness' of the home atmosphere. This spatial interaction included mere proximity, as well as 'accessibility' and communicating with one another. 'The quality of the atmosphere depends essentially on the quality of the

interpersonal relations, more specifically on the degree to which people try to approach each other' (Pennartz, 1999: 99).



Figure 5.2: Chalkboard in a home



Figure 5.3: Breakfast table at Nicole and Claudio's apartment

The importance of *ritual running smoothly* differed from *the expectation of unexpected conflict* in other areas of everyday life. For instance, Adam told me that 'when Dylan's upset and [dinner] is not working, I was surprised to discover that there is a stark difference between the feeling I get from him then, and the feeling when we are all calmly sitting there eating and having a good time.' If cooking or eating together was important for a member of the household, too many missed meals might lead to missed opportunities for communication, which could have a radiating effect outwards. An unexpected incident not related to ritual, such as Dylan having a tantrum during playtime, was less likely to shift the experience of the home.

A balance also needed to be struck between alone time and familial intimacy. 'Alone time' or 'time for me' manifested most frequently in bodily activities that were known to promote wellbeing, such as regular meditation, trips to the gym, walking, gardening, and reading. A need for alone time was stronger in family households, but was expressed in most households in the study. During the latter half of fieldwork, Rachel was working on potty-training Dylan. Because I helped take care of him, I began to spend more time in the bathroom. Sometimes he asked for privacy and Rachel or I closed the door. Adam told me that the bathroom had become one of his favourite places in the house now that Dylan was older. He explained: 'He's taking showers with us, and that makes it sort of fun. When I'm getting ready in the morning, he's always coming in and visiting, frustratingly always leaving the door open... but there is something fun about that too.' While the bathroom was one of the most private spaces in the family home, the breaking of this threshold was something Adam found he enjoyed—something that made him feel more connected to his family, just like shared, peaceful meals. However, the bathroom also remained an oasis for Rachel: several times I saw her close the bathroom door and lock it when Dylan was having a

tantrum and she needed to use the toilet, just for that minute or two of privacy and solitude.

For one couple, Dennis (age 57 years) and Eric (age 49 years), the balance of solitude and togetherness took the form of two separate homes: Eric owns an apartment on the West Side and Dennis owns a house on the East Side (and has for 16 years). While both enjoyed intimate time as a couple – particularly playing cards, cooking together, and massages – Eric felt that this separate space was in some ways part of his identity. 'I'm more intentional by myself,' he explained at one juncture. 'Dennis has different habits than I have, not that they're better or worse, but a lot of them are worse and I fall into them, like they are familiar. If there's shit food around and there's good food around I will usually eat the shit food... so I usually just don't have shit food in my house.' Eric also cited having less access to television in his own place and that it became a good place to work when he was pursuing a graduate degree a few years prior. Dennis reflected that while he respected Eric's desire for space, he had a different experience of their agreement: 'I actually hate when Eric sleeps [at his place]. I don't adapt to it very well, I have a terrible time falling asleep. I really honestly just love to be in his arms, and when I go to bed it's like finally, even if I don't see him all day, it's just I love that, and waking up with Eric in the bed is really the highlight of most days… Intellectually I understand his wanting space and I think there's good things about it and it's nice to have some space… it's just the sleep thing.' Despite their different perspectives, Eric and Dennis created a lifestyle that balanced their separate needs and desires.

Balancing solitude and familial intimacy is resonant with Daniels' (2015) and Kavedžija's (2015) observations that for familial and subjective wellbeing in Japan to occur, a balance 'between dependence and autonomy' (Daniels 2015:48) is needed. Taken together these observations shed light on the interplay between atmosphere, sociality, and wellbeing.

Daniels describes the generation of 'heat' in the home, particularly bodily heat, as facilitating intimate atmospheres while still leaving room for autonomy. While contextually different, these observations have resonance in my own fieldwork. In this section, I show how part of the cultivation of good energy in the home comes from giving presence to the intangible. Love is one of the intangible elements of everyday life that must be generated through visual, material, and sensory performance. This generation is particularly important in a context that values individual identity and self-reliance because it *exhibits togetherness* without challenging personal autonomy (in other words, people can still do what they want). However, intimate sociality is actually all encompassing in a 'loving home,' creating conflict, playfulness, and generating an energy of aliveness. In practice, this sense of aliveness does not preclude autonomy, because conflict often allows for the assertion of individuality. This individuality is ultimately always relational, so actual time away for the self—or solitary activities—is ordered and protected, and is often respected by other members of the household.

The shared home offers a unique account of appropriate intimacy with non-familial familiars. Forming spaces for social bonding and exhibiting personal responsibility and care were important for sustaining a positive household energy. This was not always possible. In the first shared home, upon my arrival, and taking another tenant's place, the three of us attempted to make a more welcoming living room and cleaner apartment, so that everyone would feel comfortable (Figure 5.4). While Joe complained to me that Natalie was dirty, highlighting how after a fruit fly infestation from her piles of dirty dishes last summer, he 'gave up' on the house, Natalie complained about Joe's hostility towards her and the constant smell of weed. I became a go-between, negotiating the negative experiences of the other tenants with one another. Our experiment in creating a better atmosphere in the home ultimately failed, and the female tenant eventually decided to move out and in with her

boyfriend. She wrote to me explaining, including this paragraph:

> 'Even if [Joe] were to move out, this apartment has a ton of emotional baggage for me (perhaps the real reason I felt like I needed to shift rooms was the substantial amount of time I spent sobbing/paralyzed by emotional despair in that room). I think it makes sense for [my boyfriend] and I to have a clean slate, separate from that connection. Domestics affect me a lot, as silly as that seems. My room right now feels like a cave I don't really want to be in… I want space to stretch out.'

In the final months, the home space felt tense and uncomfortable, with most of us spending time alone in our rooms. This suggests that while in romantic partnerships and families there is an expectation of conflict, conflict within non-intimates does not generate an energy of aliveness. In my second shared home, amongst three women, early attempts were also made to make a community-oriented space, such as adding a chair in an unused corner of the kitchen (Figure 5.). This encouraged tenants to hang out while others were cooking. In our busy lives, the kitchen became a place where we could connect with one another and 'check in' about household needs. In both these instances it was not just material objects or décor that made the home space feel more welcoming, but the intention behind the changes. Whereas in the second home the intention was enough to create and sustain solidarity—even through forgotten dishes or irritating noise—in the first home the intention did not override already established irritations and rhythms.

The shared home offers a unique account of the possible transience of the home space, particularly for young adults. Irene Cieraad's (2010) research of home making amongst university students reveals that the home is a 'multilayered concept' (91) that links past familial homes with future possible ones, particularly through material objects and practices. She recognises that mundane tasks are of 'crucial importance in the daily reinvention of home' (98). I further suggest that part of homemaking in transient spaces involves reinventing everyday acts of care, even amongst strangers.



Figure 5.4: Attempts to make the shared living room look more welcoming



Figure 5.2: The addition of a chair to the kitchen

ATTEMPTS TO CREATE and sustain good energy do not always work. I return to Bruce and Chloe as an example. For much of the year, Bruce and Chloe struggled to create a different feel to their home, one that would make it feel welcoming and enticing. The 'if only' statements had mounted up—if only the dining room had more light, if only the street wasn't so noisy—and preventing Bruce from feeling like he could invite friends over for even the smallest dinner; in his old house, he was a masterful entertainer. At one point, Chloe and Bruce thought that bringing more creativity into the house would help. The next time I visited a few weeks later, the dining table was full of adult colouring books, coloured pencils and pens, and an assortment of other papers. Several more weeks went by and Bruce and Chloe ordered what they determined to be festive wall decals (large removable vinyl stickers, in this case depicting quotes and flowers) to add to the décor, and plotted to paint a mural in the dark dining room. In a tone of excitement, Bruce explained how he even debating having a party where they invited all their friends to add their favourite quotes to this now empty wall. Chloe later rearranged her office. The two toyed with moving the bedroom. They even thought of expanding into the attic. Each of these desires exhibited a consciousness about what the home ultimately needed: intimate sociality that generated positive energy. Yet things consistently got in the way: the street was noisy, the house was dark, and their relationship to one another was a constant source of tension. They just could not figure it out.

Bille et al. (2015) note that the ambivalence about a feel of a place has been linked with the uncanny: 'the uncanny thus marks the disruptive presence of something unknown, where safety and intimacy were anticipated' (34). Bruce and Chloe at points wondered if the house just had 'bad juju:' was it haunted, did something bad happen here? Their response to the dining room offers further insight: they ultimately did not know why they did not like it,

because it was objectively attractive, but there was just something 'dark' and uncomfortable about it. It was a 'dead space,' with a 'half-done, premature' wall lined with unhung art, and an 'interruption' to the flow of the house. The house, I suggest, had atmospheric gaps that were fostered by their ambivalence, not just about the house, but about the future of their relationship, which was in constant question. As noted in the section on energy, the ambiguity of 'energy' allows for creative interpretations of the value of persons, place, and things, and it can be used to enact blame when things are not working out. For Bruce and Chloe, the living room and other negative areas in the house became scapegoats through which they could perform tensions in their relationship.

The practices described herein—attempts to cultivate divinity, give form to absence, and create lovingness—can illuminate what is not working. It seemed Bruce and Chloe's attempts to cultivate a good energy in the home only further illuminated the faults in their relationships. Eventually, when Chloe moved out of the house after they broke up, the two decided to try the relationship again, now living in different spaces. Chloe was free to cultivate her own living space—she got new furniture, a kitten, and filled her cabinets with the healthy food she desired. Creating her home space proved to be a learning experience for Chloe—it forced her to question what mattered in her lifestyle, and over time living alone challenged her assumptions about what mattered.

In many of the households I encountered, people not only want to 'see, hear, and touch God,' as McDannell argues, they want to see, hear, and touch *the unknown*: what is absent or intangible, what might be or what could have been. Mitch Rose (2011) recognises, the material can give form to that which is immaterial: it is the absence of a presence 'that engenders what we might term "a call": a solicitation to build, produce and create in response to that which we cannot control, manage or comprehend' (119). Bille (2017)

similarly recognises how sacred objects 'attune people to a spiritual immediacy and connection with God. Such attunement comforts emotional distress, establishing mental peace, and through presencing God in body and mind safeguards spaces and people' (38). Both Rose and Bille evoke a link between uncertainty and wellbeing that giving the sacred a material presence attends to. But in taking from the examples above, I suggest that people evoke a sense of certainty by giving form to that which is intangible or difficult to cultivate: god, absence, and love. If I read these practices as giving form to absence, some of the major uncertainties of everyday life also take form: divinity, death or loss, and love. However, I am more curious to explore how the cultivation of atmosphere—or in this context, the energy of a space—can be a means through which bodies learn to negotiate the ambiguity of everyday life, and as such, learn how to negotiate greater uncertainties that they confront outside of the home or over time.

In the next section, I consider an experience while living in shared housing during fieldwork that illustrates what it might look like to embrace uncertainty through atmospheric ambiguity. I then attend to how this experience cultivates a sense of wellbeing, drawing towards the notion that uncertainty and wellbeing are inherently linked.

THE FUNERAL FOR THE PLANTS

DURING ONE WEEK in October, it did not stop raining for days. In Rhode Island, this was not unexpected: a week might be enveloped in rain each autumn, blowing the last of the foliage from the brightly collared sugar maples. Still, rain was not a daily occurrence and could be tempestuous in its effect. With Halloween on the horizon—a festival day New Englanders take seriously—the rain had a certain ambiance, marking the transitory nature of

the season, where warm days would now give way to crisp November ones.

On this night, Hannah sat on the kitchen floor of our Providence home, knowing she needed to leave. The walls of her bedroom had become suffocating, but moving into the kitchen did not remedy her restlessness. But it was pouring with rain, and she did not own a car. The sense of not feeling quite right was shared between us—and perhaps in living together, was augmented—but for some hours we were unable to adequately describe it beyond a 'strange mood.' By the evening, we were able to discern that Hannah was concerned about the sustainability of her current life: even though she loved what she did, she wondered if her life as an artist and craftsperson, financially supported by a job in retail, would be enough in years to come. The root of her uncertainty occurred several days prior, when a friend asked Hannah if she wanted to continue making jewellery for the rest of her life. Those words, *the rest of your life,* were overwhelming. Now, Hannah could not stop thinking about it and she resented her friend's opinion-laden words.

At the time of this encounter, I was deeply enmeshed in fieldwork and had already begun to consider everyday uncertainty, without naming it as such. By sheer accident, I ended up living with two women who generally thrived on ambiguity. Our other housemate, Amber, was also an artist and over the course of getting to know her I saw how the future was suspended in a continuous shroud of possibility and her past narrated as a series of unexpected events, some fortuitous, others difficult. The unknown was entirely entangled in her creative process; without it, there would be no art. On this night, Amber was, as usual, engaged in a project and stressed about a deadline. Deadlines and money were some of the few certainties of her life, and they were both sources of stress. What living with Hannah and Amber taught me is that we all have different things that inspire uncertainty. Amber's stress over deadlines and money was ultimately because these certainties inspired uncertainty,

but the kind that caused anxiety. The uncertainty of what she would create next or do with her life was often pleasurable. Hannah, on the other hand, did not mind the uncertainties of her annual income and found that deadlines inspired work, and generally embraced the uncertainty of what the day would bring. It is because of this engagement with everyday surprises that Hannah led me, on that rainy evening, to the Funeral for the Plants.

It came up out of nowhere: *I was invited to this farm dinner thing,* she said, *you should come.* Retrospectively, I was struck by Hannah's ability to attend to her feeling of unease about the future through a creative action: we would get up and go to what was presented as a fairly mysterious event. Hannah did not know what we would find, she just had faith it would shift the mood. In the warmth of a renovated industrial garage on the West Side of Providence, we found comfort in a mesh of colour and sound, scents and tastes, activities and conversation. We hugged old friends and shook hands with new ones. We piled our plates with quinoa with kale, a radish and parsley salad, cooked carrots, and freshly baked bread served with butter and local honey, which Hannah returned to with delight despite her slight intolerance to gluten. We sat at a long table in the centre of the room and had conversations with friends and strangers. We traded stories about our lives: Hannah's friend's divorce, Hannah's doubt about the future, and my own mid-fieldwork exhaustion. In my memory, the event glows with smiles despite the former moodiness of the night. The energy of the space entirely shifted our experience, so much so that I had no idea it was even the same night until I revisited my field notes.

The event was officially called 'Flower Coffin: Funeral for the Plants,' celebrating the harvest and Halloween. Hannah's friend, Grace, an urban herbalist, organised the annual event, while a small farm in neighbouring Massachusetts supplied most of the food. Grace offered botanical cocktails made from her herbal tinctures and gin from a small New

England distillery. After dinner, Grace led everyone outside, into the rain, for a 'Eulogy for the Flowers.' Fifteen or so participants huddled in a circle in the light rain while she passed around a bundle of dried sage, tied tightly with twine, and a lighter. *Please smudge yourselves,* she said without further explanation. Smudging in this context is not unfamiliar to me: it is considered a Native American practice of cleansing where the smoke a lit bundle of sage is spread across either a space or body in a ritualistic manner (often by hand movements which disperse the smoke). This practice is familiar enough to the urban folk in attendance to carry forward without much explanation, even if some of them seemed not quite sure what to do. After the eulogy, Grace began a chant, and we walked around the circle, following one another, through the moments of lit sage which Trisha, standing still, wafting at us as we walked past. Some danced, some chanted, others just walked in silence. This event was not unlike the evocation of the divine described in the households above—except the evocation was about myth and death and renewal: Grace, dressed as Persephone, put the garden to bed for the winter. The event confronted the unknown future.

I suggest that what this event did was evoke a sense of trust that life would continue even if the future was unknown. It created an atmospheric presence of mystery within the bounds of commensality. The sage, chanting, and storytelling in the presence of the fading autumn garden, all added to the mystery. While the future was unknown, the promise of summer's return was carefully loaded into our bellies amongst bread and honey. This sensory experience was also shared amongst those in attendance, making it feel connected and real. The practices described in the preceding section also evoke trust. Part of this trust emerges in the enduring quality of the everyday: what is sustained on a daily level gives a sense of continuity. Giving presence to the divine (omniscient trust) and love (interpersonal trust) provides order and stability, and exhibits everyday care for the space and the other,

sustaining the overall quality of everyday life.

It is in this way that wellbeing and uncertainty are entwined. Wellbeing is not separate from our everyday interactions with the unknown. As wellbeing has a temporal quality, felt both in the moment and over time, it is deeply enmeshed in our experience of the past and the potentiality of the future (Gardner 2015; Robbins 2015). It is this future potentiality that can inspire both anxiety and creativity. From this, I pose a question: does the embracing of everyday uncertainty help sustain wellbeing over time? I reflect on this in the discussion.

DISCUSSION

ATMOSPHERES ARE ALWAYS PRESENT, regardless of 'whether they are cozy, scary, dull, intimate, tense, informal, or lack verbal articulation' (Bille, 2017:39). This chapter focuses on conscious attempts at cultivating a particularly energy in the home, attempts which can easily fail because atmospheres are inherently mutable and relational. Sustaining 'positive energy' in the households studied is a task that is negotiated between household architecture and design, things and 'half things,' and social relations. In considering the examples above, routines and rituals, altars, and lighting are a part of this sustainment, helping to ward away disquiet or provide sanctuary and comfort in difficult times. Spirituality and lovingness are elements of the subjects' homes that do not have immediate form, but are rather given it through a complex interplay between subjective experience, objects, and collective performance. They can make the home welcoming, warm, and cosy, fostering good energy, or aliveness. Robbins' suggestion that a chain of 'successful social interactions' (with success defined locally) is 'capable of generating appropriate effervescence' (225)

resonates with the findings presented herein: long-term wellbeing is sustained by a chain of positive generations of energy; for many, these generations of energy are rooted in social, sometimes ritualised, intimacy (or 'successful social interactions'), with family and friends and the joy of temporary solitude.

I return to the connection between atmosphere, wellbeing, and uncertainty. As I described above, both Rose (M. Rose 2011) and Bille (2017) connect uncertainty and wellbeing through the evocation of the sacred in atmospheric practices. I suggest that in giving form to the sacred (which is sometimes nature, in the case of the Funeral for the Plants), participants sustain a sense of trust in the continuity of their everyday lives. Spirituality in many ways attends to existential and ontological uncertainties: the possibility of death or illness, for instance. However, the sustainment of wellbeing through atmospheric practices also responds to the scales of national and global uncertainty that can cause anxiety and fear. Harkening back to insecurity in America, Massumi (2005) describes how the affective reality of potential threat in the US after September 11th takes on an 'ambient thickness' (62) that 'modulates felt qualities' – it does not rely on actual incidents or objects, but rather the potential for an incident similar to ones in the past. He draws attention to what C. S. Peirce calls 'indications,' such as a fire alarm, which infuses the body with a sense of alarm, even when there is not a fire. Leibing (2009) notes that scandals around certain pharmaceuticals, including hiding negative data and selective publication, add to 'an atmosphere of unease and doubt regarding medications in general' (183). Evidence of climate change also causes unease, from an increase in 'superstorms' to increasingly damaging droughts and fires in the West (Petryna 2015). In this way, the undercurrent sensory experiences associated with threat become interwoven in our everyday lives; they are a part of the greater atmospheres of uncertainty within which the home can become a

sanctuary.

Many subjects are careful about what from the outside world is let in to the home—from rain or winter salt to political viewpoints, news sources, and food. As Bille et al. (2015) note: 'homes offer a potential for rethinking the atmosphere of a place, by focusing on bodily intimacy and presence, but equally about processes of social attachment and detachment orchestrated through sensory experiences and the temporality and dynamic nature of atmosphere' (36). These everyday attempts at sustaining positive energy help participants assuage the uncertainty of the external world, fostering homes that are 'sanctuaries' of familiarity, even if these sanctuaries are not always realised in practice.

Of course, it is important to be critical of the notion that the home is a sanctuary. It is rather a site of intimate opposition, of 'belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear' (Blunt and Varley 2004:3). However, the notion of the domestic as a refuge is a meaningful cultural metaphor in the American context, where the formation of love bonds or romantic partnerships are a core part of the formation of 'lifestyle enclaves,' where like-minded individuals can create an isolated but similar lifestyle (Bellah et al. 1985). In his account of love cross-culturally, Charles Lindholm (2006) notes that romance in 'societies with extremely fluid social relations marked by mobility and competition, operating according to individualistic worldviews within harsh or otherwise insecure environments […] is associated with marriage, since the couple is idealized as the ultimate refuge against the hostile world, and functions as the necessary nucleus of the atomized social organization' (16). This account is compelling because of its relationship to insecurity— although my fieldwork suggests that the romantic notion of 'love' and how it attends to security extends far beyond the couple. The ideal family is also recognised as a sentimental, emotional bond. Further, although Lindholm was not interested in the home space, his observations draw

attention to the social bonds within the home as a 'refuge', not the home itself. As a high percentage of the households in my fieldwork were transitory or impermanent households, social solidarity was fundamental to the making of a 'home,' not necessarily the space itself. However, the dwelling itself became a physical space where 'the defining cultural metaphor of American kinship' –'a diffuse, enduring solidarity between members that define themselves as family' – is upheld over time (Olesen 2010:35; [referencing Schneider, 1979]).

This chapter offers another insight into how the home can function as a sanctuary or refuge to some middle class households. Atmosphere, like uncertainty, is inherently ambiguous and difficult to define, emerging through the positive space of material, practices, and subjective insights. I suggest that because of this link, cultivating atmosphere is an embodied learning about how to negotiate uncertainty. To make this argument, I draw on both Thomas Csordas' (1993) notion of 'somatic modes of attention' and Bille's (2013) notion of the 'ontological vagueness' of atmosphere discussed in the introduction. For Csordas, 'somatic modes of attention are culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others' (138). As embodiment is accompanied both by analytical ambiguity of the part of the anthropologist and the general 'indeterminacy of existence' (149), Csordas turns to the work of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Bourdieu 1977). He describes how human action and meaning are both 'open-ended and inexhaustible' (Merleau-Ponty) and 'structured according to an enduring system' (Bourdieu) (151). While their works are in some ways irreconcilable, he describes the body as both improvisational and bound to the structuring structures of the habitus, which the body can never fully know (Bourdieu 1977). Perhaps something can be learned from the body's engagement with indeterminacy itself, or what Bille calls 'ontological vagueness' (62), in the form of atmosphere. In discussing light in the

creation of Danish *hygge*, Bille concludes that the ontological vagueness of atmospheres 'becomes the medium for expressing and unfolding social and emotional life through the varied visibility that light and darkness offers' (62). Understanding that atmospheres are ultimately more than human staging (they are always present), I suggest that the orchestration of atmosphere teaches the body about indeterminacy or vagueness itself. In learning how to cultivate desired domestic energies, people are confronting and giving form to the unknown. They learn what works for them and for their families, locating the disconnects, the holes, the further uncertainties. This care for space, which entails a care for the intimate other, becomes embedded in everyday bodily experience. It becomes a habit to return to when things fall apart. I observed this in Rachel's home, where regular meditation and the maintenance of things and space created a sense of peace in Rachel's body. Because she *knew* this sense of wellbeing, as an embodied experience that followed her actions, she knew also to maintain the atmosphere that sustained it. Attempts to cultivate a particular energy also allow the body to confront failure, as seen in the case of Bruce and Chloe. In essence, just as an altar might be a 'sensory template' for self-making (D. Morgan 1998), everyday atmospheric practices provide templates for desired wellbeing, teaching the body how to engage with ambiguity.

The atmospheric practices described in this chapter are also a part of what individuals can control, and thus provide certainty in everyday life. However, a question emerges about the bounds of this control: does a home that is tightly cultivated leave room for creative response to uncertainty? This chapter suggests that the atmospheric sustainment of individual and collective household wellbeing over time takes an awareness of irregularity: the loving, happy home also needed to allow for play, mess, and aliveness. Surprise or luck too has its place in the nuances of joy: as the narratives of many participants revealed, life

'unfolded,' sometimes in unexpected and thrilling ways.[26] I thus suggest that sustaining wellbeing overtime is related to striking a balance between certainty and uncertainty, or experiencing the ambiguous as pleasurable as opposed to uncanny.

The Funeral for the Plants filled Hannah and me with a sense of both potentiality and hope, allowing us imagine new alternative futures, both for ourselves, and for the community in which we lived. Our experience of commensality gave us a new access point to the city in which we lived: the city of Divine Providence, where things were bound to go right, at least once in a while. The next chapter considers how potentiality and hope influence life in the city of Providence. Recognising that the home is a porous and multi-scalar entity connected to the outside world through everyday flows of goods and knowledge, I consider how larger scale uncertainties can affect the home. I argue that local ecological engagement in the city of Providence helps assuage greater political and economic concerns.

[26] In their book *Surprise!*, Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger (2015) explore how surprise is a nuance of uncertainty that can be 'harnessed' as a pleasurable encounter, including domestic relationships.

Chapter Six - The Enduring Presence of the Local: the home as a part of the city, nation, and globe

INTRODUCTION

THUS FAR, uncertainty has taken form as an ontological experience of the subjective self and through circumstances that include considerable engagement with the unknown (e.g. the future). It is a subjectively felt experience and relationally produced and attended to. It also remains elusive: similar to atmosphere, uncertainty is mutable and always present. In this chapter I propose that collectively felt and produced uncertainties are a part of the layers of everyday uncertainty that a household may face. The preceding chapters have attended to some of the greater uncertainties which influence the American public, as highlighted in ethnographies of insecurity and class (Heiman 2015; Gusterson and Besteman 2010) and by philosophical reflections on politics and economics (Butler 2004; Neilson and Rossiter 2005). Greater political and economic unknowns can add up and, as Neilson and Rossiter (2005) note, on 'the existential level' a variety of experiences 'mix or work in concert to create a general feeling of unease.' When uncertainty is accompanied by fear or anxiety, it can spur unproductive action. Massumi (2005) highlights that the ambiguity of the future can be politically manipulated: a potential threat to national security, such as a terrorist attack, is an 'affective reality' that 'legitimates pre-emptive action' (54). As we do not know what will happen, something bad *might* happen, and so we must act now (this is also the logic behind insurance).

Due in part to the fluidity and porosity of its boundaries (Steiner and Veel 2017), the home is recognised as a critical site for making sense of new knowledge, goods, technologies, and ideas that filter in from the outside world, or as geographer Katherine Brickell (2016) puts it, 'a vital space for understanding the micro-geographies of social and spatial uncertainty which influence, and are influenced by, wider structural forces' (227). As the households in this research are generally not affected (as far as I know) by experiences of domestic violence, 'threat' is often encountered in the outside world: violence in the street, an unexpected loud noise, or even an unnerving conversation with a stranger. Sometimes this outside world bleeds into the home particularly through the movement of materials, narratives, and atmosphere. Often it is met in public, following the everyday paths of individual bodies.

Like Chapter Five, this chapter integrates a variety of perspectives into my ethnographic analysis. I move between the nation, the city, and my participants' everyday lives, and between experiences of hope and despair. In juxtaposing these concurrent modes of being, I explore the 'local' as an experience marked by ephemeral moments. Contemporary conceptions of 'locality' or the 'local' emerged from a rapid increase in global flows of goods, people, and knowledge in the last several decades. Anxieties around what constitutes 'the global' led to the intensification of local identities, bounded by constructions of tradition, context, and culture. The local was quickly recognised to not oppose the global: 'local solidarities and imaginings may also be produced by global processes' (24). The 'sense' of a place has also been of interest to anthropologists and geographers for some time, centred on its history and meaning and the embodied senses of the people who live there (Savić 2017). Amongst my participants and in Providence in general, I observe a tension between local-global and national identity that sparks a desire to 'live locally' and perhaps

know globally. I also recognise that the 'atmosphere' of the local—of Providence and Rhode Island—functions in tandem with this desire, fostering a quality that participants find both 'edgy' and pleasurable. This atmosphere has a sensory quality that roots people to place through their everyday lived experience. I argue that by giving presence to the senses in a pleasurable way, similar to the atmospheric practices of giving form to the intangible as described in the last chapter, the local can become a place that fosters a temporary state of wellbeing or happiness. Over time, positive sensory experiences in a place can add to participant satisfaction.

I begin on the large scale, highlighting participant responses to 'America.' I then turn to the disparate conceptions of what Providence is, highlighting some of the struggles of being a city of culture-led urban regeneration, as discussed in Chapter Two. In the latter portion of the chapter, I turn to the sensory and atmospheric local, focusing on the taste of Rhode Island summer through the example of oysters. Oysters emerge as both an economy of locality and a sensory tie to place. I then turn again to the potential of place to assuage greater national uncertainties.

PROVIDENCE IN GREATER CONTEXT: 'AMERICANNESS' AND LOCAL-GLOBAL IDENTITY

WHEN I ASKED participants, at the end of the final interview, what they associated with 'Americanness' (see methods section in Chapter One), the facial expressions were comic, reflecting shock, laughter, and confusion about how to respond. As might be suggested from these visceral responses, participants often felt distanced from what they saw as 'American culture.' Several noted that they considered their families or selves to be 'apart

from the mainstream' or 'we don't fit the mould.' A 34-year-old woman living with her fiancé articulated what many others implicitly expressed: 'I think I usually divorce myself from that term. Which is really funny because obviously we're American.' A 35-year-old man recognised that they had incorporated very traditional American values into their new family, noting that 'the entrepreneurial spirit is something we identify particularly with.' His wife, agreed, but added: 'I guess I'm disinclined to label myself as American.'

More often, negative associations came to mind when I presented the term 'American.' 'It's not good; it's really not good. It's vapid,' a participants in her mid-60s told me. Terms such as selfishness, over-indulgent, and entitled were common, as participants reflected on consumerist mentality and the negative side of freedom of choice. They also spoke of intolerance and inequality, reflecting on their frustrations with anti-immigration sentiments and racism. They disliked 'jingoistic patriotism,' guns, and warmongering. One participant in his mid-forties expressed: 'I hate the Nation State of America, I hate its ideas about itself, I hate American exceptionalism, I think its bullshit.'

On the flip side, participants appreciated that the US was a country that allowed for multiple interpretations of freedom, opportunity, and choice. Many implied that this freedom allowed them to live the life that they wanted, and expressed gratitude for being able to live in the US. Their feelings of gratitude and privilege were often tempered by an awareness of inequality, knowing that not everyone was afforded the same opportunities. They appreciated how many cultures the US contained and the types of innovative communities this diversity inspired. Community was frequently cited. A single man in his mid-40s concluded that 'to be an American is to step up and be helpful and be there for your neighbours in your community.' Another woman suggested a contrary view, stating 'I find Americans to have no sense of community.' A participant in her mid-30s who had worked in

local politics was more ambivalent: 'sometimes I wonder if the sense of community I believe in isn't—I've always thought of it as American, and now I'm not sure.'

More often than not, America was approached with this sense of ambivalence. The participant who worked in local politics struggled to separate the positives and negatives:

> I think about exploration and ingenuity and freedoms to say things and do things and test things not worrying about how to censor oneself and the power and beauty of that. And I guess having work in politics there's a part of me that thinks about democracy and representative government, but then quickly my brain becomes really bitter about that. I actually spent just last week saying I was having a crisis of faith, not of religious faith but of government and the Republic representative government and how that's a sham and I don't even think I'm going to vote and how I need to get this under control before my children understand what I'm saying because that's not OK...

Several participants expressed that they wanted to believe that the majority of people were good—and did believe this on some level—but also felt consistently let down. A participant in her 50s noted: 'I'd like to believe that being an American is a good and wonderful thing, but I don't know that that's accurate.' Couples responding together exhibited much of this ambivalence, as they would often temper each other's positive or negative responses. They tended to be sympathetic, not disagreeing but rather adding another angle, ultimately reluctant to give to concrete an opinion and suggesting that politics is a delicate matter in the household.

Much of this ambivalence stemmed from the US's recent political past, particularly 9/11, the Bush administration, both relief and frustration regarding Obama's presidency, and current political debates preparing for the 2016 election. A woman in her early 40s expressed that: 'I feel quite good about being an American really, that's been since Obama patched things. I was really so so so embarrassed to be an American with Bush in power. I really felt like the whole world was so upset with us.' A second-generation Indian American in her late 30s said that before 9/11 she had a different view of America, especially after visiting family

in India. Then she was grateful for what she had, grateful to be a woman in this country, but 'after 9/11 this whole USA thing really scared the crap out of me.'

Fieldwork (from April 2015-April 2016) was also dominated by several national events and ongoing discourses. These included reports of police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement, the Supreme Court ruling to legalise same-sex marriage (26 June 2015), increased attention to the problem of sexual assault on college campuses, and the continued 'American problem' of mass shootings.[27] In this liberal enclave, 2015 felt like a moment in US history where important national social concerns were getting the attention they deserved, but which also brought many of the horrors of modern society to light. Participants often felt conflicted and several reported getting into arguments with strangers, neighbours, and friends about politics, racism, homophobia, and sexism. Tensions were high. In October 2015, an employee at a Dunkin' Donuts in Providence wrote '#blacklivesmatter' on a coffee cup and gave it to a police officer. Several Providence police responded by boycotting and protesting at the Dunkin' Donuts and the police union openly criticised the employee and the Black Lives Matter 'organization' (P. Anderson 2015). Black Lives Matter protestors gathered near the Dunkin' Donuts in response (Milkovits 2015b).

The presidential primaries—with both Republican and Democrat candidates campaigning against one another— also created an aura of uncertainty in early 2016. For the majority of the households studied, the debate was between the two primary democratic candidates, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders; Sanders would later win the popular vote in Rhode Island, and Clinton the state delegate vote. Many voiced frustration, anger, and disappointment that Sanders did not win. One woman in her early 50s noted:

> This year is a nightmare for the election so I try not to think about it because the

[27] PBS News reports that 'there were 372 mass shootings in the US in 2015, killing 475 and wounding 1,870' (Oldham 2016).

> day after, either way I'm going to be nauseous, whether Hillary gets in or Trump, I'm gonna be nauseous. I think I'd be less nauseous with Hillary because I don't think she'd bring us into war. The only thing that makes me at peace with Trump… Is I don't know, maybe he will do something… I was not impressed with Obama and I'm not impressed with what she is saying. I don't feel safe in the country with the way it's going.

This expression was a typical concern amongst this liberal community, especially after Bernie lost the primaries. The fear inspired by politics was cited frequently. One participant explained that 'the idea of kind of like the jingoistic American, you know, it's a little distasteful. Yeah I find it distasteful, I find unnerving, it scares me.'

Travelling outside of the US also affected people's experiences, adding both to the ambivalence and distaste. A participant in his mid-fifties utilised travel memories to express his ambivalence: 'when I hear Americanness, I just kind of think of Donald Trump and all the negative stuff more than I think the positive stuff, but when I was in Japan I remember saying [America is] awesome.' Another participant, who had been to many different countries and lived in India for a period of time, expressed that 'everywhere I've ever been in the world people have been nicer and calmer and more down-to-earth.' Several other participants, in speaking of travel and global communities, implied that Americans were insular. 'We have a global economy but we don't have global thought,' a woman in her 60s articulated.

The quote reflects a sentiment that I noted amongst many participants both within and outside of interviews: people saw themselves as being a part of a global community, which *other Americans* were not. They also tended to associate themselves with regional, ethnic, or local identities instead of being 'American.' Several explicitly expressed that they were happy to live in the Northeast. One participant implied people in the Northeast were better educated (than the south) while another called it an 'intellectual elite' and probably not

a good sampling of Americans. These expressions, mirror, in some ways the observation that 'locality' responds to anxieties about the unknowns of global production, but which is ultimately tied to global systems and flows (Cook and Crang 1996). Jonathan Friedman (2008) highlights how cosmopolitan identity 'is for some a celebration of rootlessness and for others a powerfully ambivalent state of liberation versus alienation. Cosmopolitans identify with the urban, with the "modern," with high culture that belongs to the world rather than the nation' (273). In writing of local food movements and globalism, Nonini (2013) describes the penchant for the local as not a social movement, but 'an assemblage' of practices that 'not only responded to neoliberal globalisation and the food it produces but also rejects in large part the modernist project of the nation state' (267). Of course, there is variability in how the local is produced in light of the national: 'different segments of the population form distinctive levels and intensities of attachment—and detachment—with respect to the nation-state' (274).

Participant views about the US economy also reflect this preference for the local and global over the national. A participant in her mid-30s thought that capitalism was holding America back, and that we needed to 'catch up' to other industrialised countries, implying that capitalism and socialism are at odds in the US. Another saw the US consumer economy as a force that stabilises the country and economy: 'even in the worst of times, [money] keeps moving.' He was particularly keen, however, in buying locally, supporting the Providence and Rhode Island economy as much as possible.

In addition to participant responses to the idea of 'Americanness,' the everyday material culture of some homes reflects the sentiments expressed above. Some integrated local food and other goods into the home space, which affirmed some participant's presence as citizens of Providence and/or Rhode Island. Strikingly, the US flag, seal, and other

nationalistic emblems were almost entirely absent from most homes, or were used ironically or on national holidays, such as the fourth of July. This differs from many of the suburban and country Connecticut homes where I grew up, where displays of the flag, particularly aestheticized historic displays, are common. The primary hint at national identity emerged through soundscapes: several participants reflected that they would listen to National Public Radio or have the news on the television in the mornings and evenings. While radio and TV news provide a particular soundscape in the home that inspires civic engagement, however passively, these sounds can also easily be switched off.

Two participants were particularly active in integrating Providence 'stuff' into the aesthetics of their homes, such as through art and photography depicting the city or locally made goods. One participant sought to support local artists and craftspeople, and was slowly amassing a small collection of screen prints, pottery and other small goods, and paintings. They both displayed local magazines, such as *The Providence Monthly* or *Edible Rhody*. Both came from other Northeastern states and had settled in Rhode Island for work. In Figure 6., the measuring cups are bought from a local, neighbourhood boutique that the participant wanted to support. Instead of being used, the cups were displayed next to a collection of classic English-language literature, including novels by American writers William Faulkner and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and English writers George Elliot, D.H. Lawrence, and Thomas Hardy. There are also two philosophical texts by liberal thinkers that influenced American government and culture: John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. The books signalled this participant's identity as a well-read and educated individual, and the measuring cups identified her taste for fine objects. More than just an expression of 'distinction' through taste (Bourdieu 1977), such a display signalled her participation in wider Western culture, beyond the US: embedded within this image is a fusion of America's

English past with 'local' aesthetic. This is an activity that creates distinction in its own right: many participants were embedded in and performed a particular habitus of middle class local-global ethics (Bourdieu 1977; 1979). Local goods would often be integrated into displays of global citizenship, such as travel photos or posters collected from around the world, books providing evidence that the owner was 'well-read,' non-local art, and even the display of ethnic objects, similarly explored in North American homes by Olesen (2010). Olesen's participants often collected these objects on their own travels, thereby displaying their own histories. I noted that the display of the global was common amongst those who did not necessarily feel at home in Rhode Island (in contrast to the desire to root noted above) or those who had immigrant families.



Figure 6.1: Expensive measuring cups from the neighbourhood kitchen shop displayed on British and American classic literature

The creation and sustainment of a middle class local-global ethic is seen most clearly in the consumption of local food. In the past decades, the notion of urban and environmental sustainability has become a primary focus of many urban plans, city commissions (Providence has an Office of Sustainability[28]), and non-profit enterprises. With a growing awareness of sustainable agriculture and food security, the 'local food movement' is perhaps the most widely cited local ecological consciousness experience across the US. The local food movement responds in part to frustrations with capitalist production, including factory farming, controversies over genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and unnecessary waste (Nonini 2013). Criticised for its inaccessibility to low-income groups, 'locally-grown' food has become associated the white, middle class and their aestheticized preferences (Guthman 2011). While many scholars are critical of its limits, few hesitate to recognise its benefits or to take part (Guthman 2011; Nonini 2013).

In Providence, urban gardening initiatives and neighbourhood farmers markets are well integrated into city life . Farm Fresh Rhode Island, a non-profit founded in 2004, is responsible for connecting New England farmers to consumers, through farmer's markets, wholesale markets, and restaurants. The initiative has teamed up with the Rhode Island Departments of Health and Human Services to make this food available to low-income residents through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In addition to a variety of small neighbourhood farmers markets in the summer months, Farm Fresh holds a Winter Farmer's Market in the Hope Artiste Village in Pawtucket, just north of Providence. Many participants shopped at the Farm Fresh neighbourhood farmers markets year round. I visited the Hope Artiste Village winter market with three households and I would occasionally run into others (Figure 6.2). Here people could get locally-roasted

[28] The SustainPVD initiative was implemented by Mayor Jorge Elorza in 2015 ("Office of Sustainability" 2017).



Figure 6.1: Example of an urban garden on the West Side of Providence

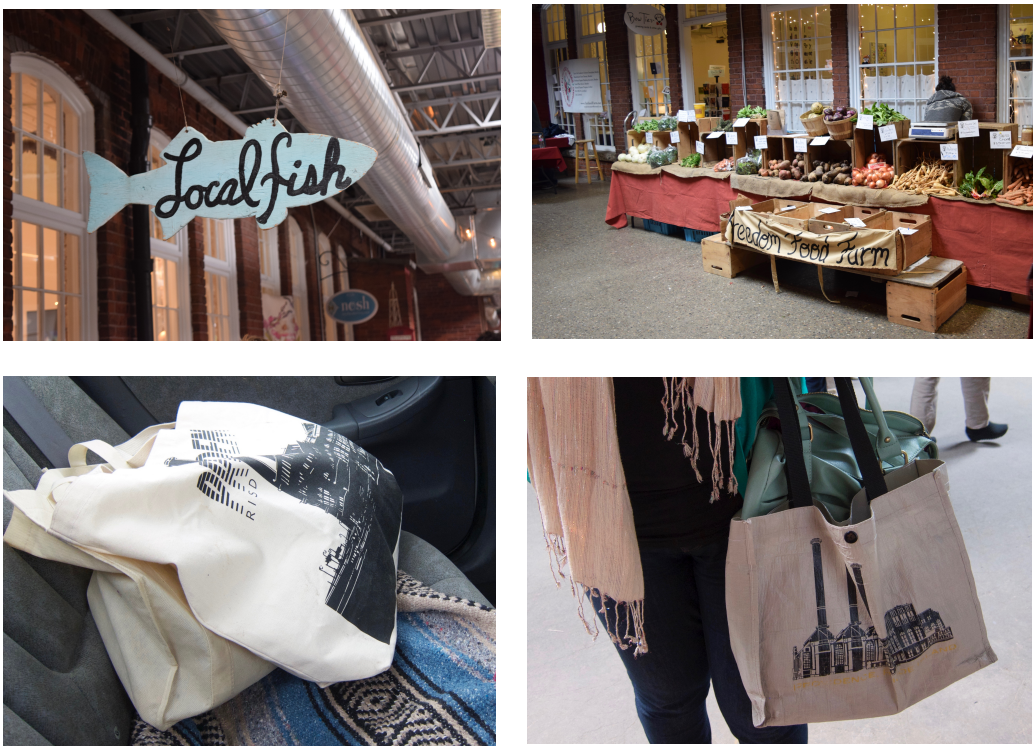

Figure 6.2: Shopping at the Hope Artiste Village winter market: local farms (including aquaculture and fishing) and local, reusable shopping bags, one of the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and a depiction of the skyline along the Providence River as seen from Fox Point.

coffee and mingle with friends and neighbours while perusing stalls sourced from all over southern New England: fruits and vegetables, sea food, pies and desserts, skin care products, honey, eggs, and other goods. Even dairy had Rhode Island versions: many participants drank 'Rhody Fresh' milk—which they chose even over organic varieties—and bought cheese from Narragansett Creamery.[29]

There were notable variations within the trends discussed above. Immigrants and first-generation Americans, or the children of immigrants, differed from the others in some respects. While they held on to their ethnic identities in some capacity, each defined themselves as Americans and expressed that they had grown up with a different identity than their parents. Several also expressed how their opinions had changed over time, particularly after political events, and expressed similar ambivalent sentiments as others. One participant, who was Italian and came to the US for graduate school, associated America with lattes and American football and baseball, and appreciated these things. Another woman, whose family was from Ghana, was notably neutral and brief in her response: 'I would say baseball and apple pie for us. Soccer. It's community. It's the different cultures. It's the democracy.'

A sole participant expressed that he had 'never been more proud to be an American than ever before in my life' and liked what the Republic presidential nominee was bringing to America. He was critical of illegal immigration in particular because he felt there was an appropriate way to be an immigrant. He explained how his mother had come from Colombia at eight years old and that she had the 'same old story of working hard' and 'very methodical, smart decision-making.' Like many of the other participants, he felt that freedom was an important part of allowing people to become their best selves. He

[29] Rhode Island ranked number 9 on the 'Strolling of the Heifers Locavore Index' in 2015 and 2016 ("Strolling of the Heifers Releases 2016 Locavore Index Ranking the States in Terms of Commitment to Local Food" 2016).

articulated how he learned to straddle conservative and liberal mentalities:

> As an artist and a creative person, I've been knee deep in these communities for 15 years and with that comes a lot of entitlement and laziness. What I've done is applied the work ethic and conservative mentality that my parents had— even without me knowing— I've been applying that to my career path throughout this journey. Things like being competitive, ambitious, dreaming big and working hard— these are some conservative values I've been pumping in to this liberal lifestyle.

Like many of the other participants, he channelled his disparate experiences of America into an individualist identity built around a local community.

In a similar vein, not all participants were as eager to engage with the local. For Adam and others, there were atmospheric aspects to Rhode Island that reminded them of undercurrent concerns around the health of the environment and inequality. He explained:

> There's just a lack of care of the environment, and the aesthetic of the houses, and those kinds of things. It makes it feel kind of depressed to me. And you know backwards thinking. And depressed environment, and aesthetics, and all that makes me feel heavy. You know to put it in a yoga way, what is it, tamasic, is that it? You go to the ocean, great. But even [the park on the bay], you'd think oh this is wonderful, even the shape of a going out to the ocean and everything, but you can't go in the water—[there's glass everywhere on the beach, Rachel adds.] (Figure 6.4)

Another participant referenced the 'friction' of the city, caused by 'a generational and cultural divide.' Another cited a 'total physiological phase change' moving from one neighbourhood to an adjacent one, which was described as 'not a neighbourhood' at all (Figure 6.3). Of course, these affective feelings about their living spaces were infused with embodied aesthetics—what Julie Guthman (2011) calls an 'unstated preferences for places with amenities often associated with urbane, privileged environments, including university towns, artsy enclaves, gentrified urban cores, and ever older well-heeled suburbs' (86). The local is imbued with both pleasure and disgust, which is subjective and mutable.



Figure 6.3: Closed shops on the West Side



Figure 6.4: Waste in the bay after Fourth of July

As I've highlighted above, participants—in their ambivalence—were able to nuance how choice, freedom, consumerism, hard work, entrepreneurship and other American 'values' had both positive and negative effects. Americanness was not wholly disregarded; it was selectively picked. This ambivalence is both dangerous and productive. On the one hand, American ambivalence is precisely what makes 'Americanness' an easily manipulated term. Ambivalence might suggest that American identity is at stake and needs to be reinvented. Employed by a persuasive leader, it can even be suggested that America's greatness needs to be restored. On the other hand, it inspires a local production of identity, which so many of my participants grasp onto. As with the case of Billy above, participants strove to form individual and family identities tied to local communities, which were both picked (e.g. lifestyle enclaves) and encountered. Ambivalence about national identity allows Americans to create their own lives—while the Western frontier no longer exists, exploration continues to be found in the self, the home, and the city. This echoes Anna Tsing's (2015) account of Americanness described in Chapter Two. In the forests of Oregon, where the mushroom pickers roam, stories are remade in ways that don't always make sense: 'Frontier romanticism runs high in the mountains and forests of the Pacific Northwest,' she writes. 'It is common for whites to glorify Native American and identify with the settlers who tried to wipe them out' (86). If this ambivalence about America spreads further than just the households studied, it suggests that it breeds selective and often geographically-bound 'local' communities with widely disparate ideas about what things like freedom, community, and self-reliance actually are.

The first argument of this chapter is that 'the local' emerges as a place outside of national discourses, where lives can be made and remade *differently*. Having explored some of

the 'ambivalence' about nationhood that accompanies my informants' identities, I turn now to their imaginings of the city of Providence. I juxtapose their perspectives against several public case studies regarding the institutional imagining of Providence: how the State, government officials, and police force respond to what constitutes this urban locale.

DIS/JOINTED VISIONS: THE IMAGINING OF PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

STANDING OUTSIDE a church on a hot summer day in downtown Providence—30 degrees Celsius and humid— I suddenly became aware of the blue-tinged lips of the woman standing next to me as her partner explained that she was eight months pregnant and attached to oxygen for emphysema. He protectively glanced over to her and tells me, in no uncertain terms, that she would not die alone.

While we spoke, people were beginning to gather on the street, waiting for the weekly soup kitchen provided by the church to open. Kevin and Laura were both currently homeless and deeply invested in the politics of homelessness. For some years, they rented a home where they allowed homeless individuals to live temporarily during states of transition—a few months ago they lost this home and found themselves unable to afford the deposit on another with their limited income. The shelters were either at capacity or separated by gender. The women's shelter could take Laura, but not Kevin, and this was not acceptable to either of them: it was more important they stay together.

Some months prior a homeless man had died alone under a bridge. His death sparked a movement amongst the homeless under the assertion that no human should have to die alone. This statement boldly proclaimed the importance of community and human connection even under dire circumstances—something that the local social services and the

accompanying bureaucracy failed to provide.

The couple—and other homelessness advocates I met—had much to say about the main homeless shelter in town, a prominent tall building rising above Interstate 95, at the edge of the western half of the city and downtown. Kevin assured me that without the homeless, the people who run the shelter would not get money from the state and would not get jobs. They had invested interest in keeping the homeless homeless.

Kevin told me the story of a guy who has a three-bedroom house and is paying twenty-five dollars a month, who is no longer an alcoholic, but still isn't helping himself or others. Laura, chiming in, stated emphatically: 'How is he learning to take care of himself if they're doing it? You're not held accountable.'

Laura and Kevin recalled tent city, where they taught people basic skills to get back on their feet. Tent city was a group of pop-up shelters for the homeless that grew its own moral rulebook based on community interreliance and contained basic amenities, namely a toilet and refuse containers (Barry 2009). They spoke of it with admiration and were indignant at the city's dismantling of a good community. Tent city was better than the shelters. It took in people who couldn't find a place in the shelters or who were robbed or raped there. It also didn't have the bureaucracy. You could get a pair of socks, Kevin told me, without filling out 'three pieces of paperwork.' In tent city, they would lay the donated clothes out and people could take what they needed.

They spoke too of police harassment. Rhode Island was the first state in the country to legally introduce the Homeless Bill of Rights, which aims to protect the rights of homeless people and reduce discrimination. But in reality, they explained to me, the police don't follow it.

I nodded, agreeing that there is a sense of both innovation and corruption in this

town.

Go to the park in the early morning, they told me then. *But don't dress like that. Wear something less nice. See if you get asked to leave.*

KEVIN AND LAURA reflected on the importance of accountability and teaching people skills to survive, valuing both self-reliance and interrelationality. The tension that emerges is one of entrepreneurial freedoms and the ethics of State care, which at times seem wholly irreconcilable. Regardless of the structural undertones of inequality, the belief that the individual can take care of his or her own life is pervasive in America. The counterpart to self-reliance is the notion of community enclaves and loving partnership—of being 'together,' through better or worse. The last chapter illustrated some of the sentiments that surround love in the home. My encounter with Kevin and Laura pointed me towards the enduring presence of this kinship: self-reliance and community are so often placed in opposition, and yet they are fundamental to what it means to be an American (Bellah et al. 1985). While Kevin and Laura are far removed from the comforts of the middle class homes visited throughout this thesis, this conversation stands out as one of the in/coherent visions of what Providence is and could be.

Kevin and Laura also shed light on the scales of uncertainty in a city like Providence. Brickell's (2016) review of critical geographies of the home highlights homelessness as one of the multi-scalar aspects of studies on the 'home,' which sheds light on how 'intimate and personal spaces of home – and their loss – are closely bound up with, rather than separate from, wider power relations' (229). Up until this point I have focused intensively on the everyday uncertainty that affects the middle class, from divorce, to car accidents, to illness, but in this chapter I feel it is vital to juxtapose the scales of precarity that are evident within a

city, particularly because homelessness is visible to anyone who walks the streets of the city.

In the early days of fieldwork, I attended several meetings and conducted three interviews with participants in a homelessness advocacy group. During this period I was struck most by stories of fire. Fire was something that had not occurred to me as a reason for homelessness, and yet, hearing the stories, it seemed obvious. Often houses burning down occurred in tandem to job loss or mental and physical illness, and people found it extra difficult to rebuild their lives after such devastation. Adriana Petryna (2015) points out that 'urban conflagrations were once "a central fact of urban life"' and a threat that has now, with climate change, been 'revived as a singular deadly threat, particularly in the American West and Southwest where wildfires have become rampant and confront frontline emergency service workers with behaviours that fall outside the range of normal experience' (150). Once again this points to the scales of uncertainty: while the Northeast does not feel the threat of wildfires as frequently and with such intensity, we are still wrapped in the 'smoke' of the US's various regional climate change disasters, from hurricanes to tornadoes to fire. For many the homeless individuals I spoke to, fire was not a threat but a certainty in their past. It opened doors to further hardship, and for some, to stories of recovery.

In the middle class, precarity may only be felt as a *possibility*, but this possibility exists as part of the mechanisms of neoliberal labour: one must always be prepared to take care of one's self (Heiman 2015; Tsing 2015). Not many of my participants turned their backs to the possibility of loss: past experiences and awareness of future possibility made them cultivate the habits of adaptability highlighted in Chapter Four. Acutely aware that their potential was limited by their 'middleclassness,' many sought alternative forms of wealth. No one was moving from rags to riches: the American Dream was now composed of various other capitals.

Place emerged as one such capital: for many of my participants, the city of Providence and its surrounding towns offered a way of life that was 'better' than other US cities. They spoke of how it was both affordable *and* cosmopolitan, offering arts, culture, good food, and innovative ideas. It had a 'small town' vibe, encouraging both entrepreneurship and community. As one local entrepreneur explained to me, *Providence is not New York. It will not kill you and it will not eat you up.* This referenced the city's smallness, which allowed for people to take more risks, particularly in art or business. You would not get lost in the competition of many, many bodies trying to make something of themselves in New York. Providence appeared as a path towards the future by way of an aestheticized past: urban renewal brought community back, including small business. It was a city of 'potential.'

THE WORD 'POTENTIAL' emerged most frequently from participants in descriptions of the city of Providence. The word *potential* encapsulates both creative imaginings and their current immateriality: potential describes things that have not yet come to pass. Inherent within this word is the sense of things getting both better and staying the same. Within participant imaginings of what Providence was I spotted profound love and the frustration that emerges when a close relationship does not live up to its potential. This love was remarkably different from the ambivalence about America: Providence and Rhode Island remained a place of rootedness or the possibility of rootedness, providing both identity and community. Frustrations were akin to a lovers quarrel.[30]

Potential took a variety of different forms. For a transplant from Virginia—an academic with Cherokee roots who lived on the East Side—Providence offered a space of possibility for helping true diversity take shape. For an African-American woman who grew

[30] As noted previously, not all participants exhibited a 'love' for Providence and Rhode Island, but they were in the minority. Exceptions emerge later in the chapter.

up and lived in the West End (to be differentiated from the 'West Side') and worked for the State, people are 'entrepreneurial by survival' and we just have to give them the tools—some of Providence's better initiatives were doing just that. She described one neighbourhood initiative as bringing 'worlds together' to inspire 'cultural diversity' in what was probably 'one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in the city and the state,' with 40% of its population born in other countries. 'I think that the cultural diversity is a huge opportunity for this neighbourhood,' she said. She had just come from a meeting about Providence, where 'seventy-five' tables of eight discussed the question: 'what do you think our strengths are, from a community perspective?' I asked her what came up:

> The diversity. The size, that it was sort of a lab-type of a state where you can kind of wrap your hands around it and do one thing. The fact that we had a lot of brainpower from all the Universities, Brown, PC, Rhode Island College, RISD, URI. We have a really high concentration of universities, some of the top ones in the country. We also had a nice vibrant downtown, this nice arts culture; we have lots of nice food. I think some of the negatives were that Rhode Island doesn't like change; people are stuck in their ways sometimes.

Overall, my participants' love for the city was rooted in a sense of attainable entrepreneurship (that anyone could start anything), the smallness of the community (for providing opportunities), affordability (particularly in relation to neighbouring Boston or New York), arts and food culture (for social enjoyment), proximity to the sea (for the beach season), and the possibility for potential. But Providence's potential did not go uncontested. Participants also highlighted that possibility is consistently capped by a suffering economy, a legacy of nepotism, and inconsistent development agendas. One woman in her 30s, a musician and teacher, noted:

> I have a general feeling that it has potential, I just have to, in my own personal life, be afforded the opportunity to find a stable existence within that potential. And that's questionable, so I'm always looking at other places.

Another participant, who worked with several grassroots community initiatives, was particularly opinionated but also fairly eloquent about Providence's limits:

> Providence, I think it's a great town with great potential. It's been slowly improving in the seven years, but slowly… There's like a generational and cultural divide in Providence that causes a lot of friction, and it's related to I think older politicians and younger, like people who actually live in Providence. And it's primarily a Dominican[31] city now… and the young people I know [where I volunteered in the East End] are incredible. There's a big activist movement, the Occupy movement, the Black Lives Matter movements here have been really impressive and all run by teenagers… the schools are shitty but a lot of the kids in them are awesome […] I think the old guard [politicians, money people, landlords] of this city is holding it back from what is a very vibrant group of young people […] there's just a total disconnect, and I think the corruption is—that's been frustrating over seven years, it's two steps forward, one step back, or maybe like, one step forward, and two steps back…

In Chapter Two I highlighted some of the key historical examples in the 'contested makings' of Providence over time, questioning how certain demographics are excluded from the 'material and symbolic fabric of the city' (Bullen 2016:8). As this participant suggests, the 'contested makings' continue.

Two public incidents that occurred during fieldwork serve as case studies of these 'contested makings' from the eyes of my middle class participants. In 2015, the State hired an 'all-star team' including New York City based Milton Glaser, the creator of the 'I [heart] NY' slogan, and a Rhode Island based design think tank, Epic Decade, to design a new logo (Rhode-Island 2015). The resulting image attempted to capture the Ocean's States' love of the sea and unique charm with an abstract white sail outlined in orange, yellow, and blue and the words 'Warmer and Cooler.' The logo immediately received a barrage of social media critique, with edited versions appearing on Instagram and Facebook, including changing the

[31] According to the US Census, Dominicans constitute 16.55% of Providence County's foreign-born population. The metropolitan region of Providence, New Bedford (Massachusetts), and Fall River (Massachusetts) contain the fourth largest Dominican population in the country, with New York and Boston greater metropolitan regions ranking first and third, respectively. Dominicans constitute 3.3% of Rhode Island's population, with 89.7% of Latinos in Rhode Island living in Providence County. ("US Census Bureau" 2010)

words to 'dumb and dumber,' 'mobsters and lobsters,' and 'tepid at best' (Krause 2016). *What does 'warmer and cooler' even mean anyway?* many informants wondered. Did it have something to do with summer and winter? Were the outsiders missing an inside joke? And even if they were, wasn't this supposed to attract outsider-tourists anyway? A local news source, *The Providence Journal*, offered some insight: the slogan was 'meant to evoke the ocean, artistry, uniqueness and the hip youthfulness of the capital city along with the warmth of local communities' (Bramson 2016). The nuances of this local identity were ultimately lost in the phrase 'warmer and cooler,' as was any semblance of Rhode Island's so-called coolness. The logo became a $550,000 mistake, part of a series of mistakes in a $4.5 million dollar statewide tourism campaign, including showing images of Iceland in a promotional video. The state's chief marketing officer resigned and the governor apologised, promising to return some taxpayer money that helped pay for the logo (Nesi and Russom 2016).[32] The local artists I knew complained mostly of the campaign's ultimate fault: in a state that touted the importance of local, with one of the best design schools in the country, why was 'outside talent' brought in? What the campaign ultimately failed to do is capture what it is that makes Rhode Island desirable. It went after atmosphere—the seasonality, senses, something not quite tangible—but entirely missed the point.

A year prior, at the beginning of fieldwork, a 19-year-old local graffiti artist was arrested and fined for tagging a variety of downtown locations with statements that evoked loneliness: 'Lonely,' 'Lonely as I've ever been,' 'Lonely as ever' and 'I love you even when you don't notice' (Milkovits 2015a). Once caught, Devin Costa was court-ordered to pay $12,390, sparking a campaignf to help him pay the fine (Mulvaney 2015). The *College Hill*

[32] The 'Warmer and Cooler' fiasco was even brought up in a conference presentation given by Donna Carmichael about culture-led urban regeneration in Manchester, UK in August 2017 (Carmichael 2017). I raised my hand to share that I was conducting fieldwork in Rhode Island during this time and learned that these types of campaigns, and their failures, are common in other culture-led campaigns in similar cities.

Independent, a weekly newspaper edited by students from Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design, reported on the incident (B. Williams 2015), beginning the article with a meditation on a stagnant Providence and a changing America:

> Loneliness was there before he wrote it. In the vacant buildings, the downtown parking lots, the abandoned streets. It was there in the failing school system, the empty storefronts, the stagnant waters of the Providence River. For Devin Costa, loneliness was the feeling of a generation that woke up after a long American Dream to find they were sleeping on the sidewalk.

For those participants in their twenties and thirties, this statement reflects a shared sense of reality that accompanied their encounters with the often-pink sprawling of 'Lonely' against the cities disparate skylines. 'Lonely' reminded them that human problems still existed, and that no amount of marketing campaigns or trendy new hotspots would cover up the tensions Providence still faced. 'Lonely' was *real*, the West Side artists reflected. Yet while hipster lefties swelled with pride at Costa's daring, others rejected his attempts to bring up issues. When Costa turned himself in, the local news reported the opinion of the Captain of the Providence police (Tomison 2015):

> "[For] visitors and for people who work downtown its unsettling. It gives it a sight like as if maybe there is some issues here," said Captain Michael Correia of the Providence police. "People take pride in the city."

This case is perhaps typical in its tension between the powers that be and youthful protest; yet, Costa's daring managed to create waves. Regardless of opinions, the appearance of 'lonely' across downtown had a real material presence in the city's everyday life.



Figure 6.5: "Lonely…" painted on a building on Broadway, on the 'West Side' close to downtown

Both the Rhode Island logo and the 'lonely' graffiti would spark confusion and alienation, but whereas the logo was just puzzling, 'lonely' seemed to trigger the imagination, empathy, and a sense of creative disruption. *Who is this tagger? Why is he lonely?* It was confusing and alienating because loneliness is confusing and alienating, not because the Rhode Island people were alienated and confused. Lonely triggered emotion, much like the success of Milton Glaser's 'I love New York' slogan. 'Warmer and Cooler' was vacant, making it easy to fill with mockery. These examples further elucidate the dis/jointed imaginings of what makes Providence Providence, highlighting some of the tensions that

emerge from institutional envisionings of Providence and Rhode Island and the ephemeral moments of artistic engagement that constitute urban realities. They shed light on the glass ceiling of Providence's potential and the limits of everyday imaginings. They also further illuminate the scales of uncertainty through the provocative universality of 'loneliness.'

During fieldwork, I also spent some time in one of the remaining inexpensive studio spaces on the West Side (one where artists are not allowed to live). Long waiting lists, an aligned purpose, and credit checks often mediate access to these spaces. By meeting artists in this space and talking with the manager, I learned that the tensions between the City, development corporations, and smaller on-the-ground spaces like this one are still alive and well. Fighting to keep the space open is a constant battle, and one that the manager described as a passion—as part of his life's work and purpose. He felt that maintaining an inexpensive space for artists to work and connect was what Providence was all about. Thus, for each of these participants, doubts about the city's potential also spurred their ethically-driven involvement in its making. Others seemed to gather artistic satisfaction from the mix of possibility and dysfunction apparent in Providence—the manager at the artist warehouse referred to the city affectionately as 'salty and dour' while Billy, an artist in his mid-thirties, found Providence to be 'edgy,' with excellent creative potential.

Within participant doubt remained the question: what might be better? Many weren't sure where else they would prefer to live, suggesting that their frustrations were with larger, national issues—such as inequality, joblessness, and politics—rather than local ones. One participant reflected on his time living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but noted that it wasn't necessarily the city itself, just the openness of the sky. Chloe, from Chapter Two, lived abroad for seven years and often felt that she did not like being back in the US; her dislike of Providence was somewhat related to this. Another, coming from New York, had a hard time

adjusting to the small, insular nature of Providence, but appreciated that it was more accessible than New York, particularly in the low cost of living. For many, the possibility of finding small community with all the cosmopolitan benefits of a large city was most compelling.

Economist and social scientist Richard Florida, known for identifying the 'creative class' as a socioeconomic group and encouraging culture-led urban regeneration, describes in a recent *New York Times* article how 'urban revival' is fading out as major urban centres become too crowded and expensive (Florida 2017). While in this article he does not highlight a rising interest in more affordable urban spaces, it is apparent that many who are setting up their livelihoods are investing in smaller, lesser-known cities and towns across the country. These places offer the cosmopolitan 'culture' of urban living, such as diverse food and entertainment, with an affordable quality of life. In part because of this shift, Providence has received significant national attention in trend-setting magazines, including being featured in 2015 as the coolest city in America in *GQ* magazine (Vaughan 2015) and America's favourite city in *Travel and Leisure* magazine (*Travel and Leisure* 2015). The draw, according to these resources, is one of creative living—where small town charm can emerge amongst innovative artists, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals. A local magazine, *The Providence Monthly*, reflected on the attention, interviewing a variety of movers and shakers in the city (Tremaine 2016). One architect, Christine West, was quoted as follows:

> "We're not a corporate town," Christine West says. "Everyone I know has a really interesting job. There's a correlation there. Providence is where people who want to do what they want get to do it." She suggests the idea will become more of an asset as our national star rises. "People can have creative and unique jobs, and it's the kind of culture that promotes that," Christine explains. "I know people who make money handcrafting jewellery, or in fashion or photography. To be neighbours with an oyster farmer? Come on. If that's our strength, then the branding can be that you can choose your own destiny in Providence."

I draw out this quote because I believe it reflects what Providence entails for many of my participants: the non-corporate city, a culture that promotes creative and unique jobs, and the enduring power of 'interesting' neighbours.

Unstated in these popular reports is the necessity of individual improvisation within the precarity of creative economies (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). Creative labour is ultimately tied to uncertain global networks: 'the potential for alternative modalities of organising creative labour is inseparable from the uncertain rhythms, fluctuations and manifestations of global capital' (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). In the everyday sense, being a creative worker requires living in a state of economic uncertainty, often piecing together more than one job and having limited job security over time. And it requires, above all else, an affordable city offering space for this endeavour. However, many of my participants embraced the precarity of the creative lifestyle, preferring the freedom that their work offered over economic security. Amy and Luke exemplify what I call the 'Providencian Dream,' even though they actually live thirty minutes outside of Providence, in a woodland town with their one-year-old. Both Amy and Luke consider themselves to be entrepreneurs. Luke owns a business in Providence that caters to both tourists and locals, while Amy manages a small business (based primarily on her labour/skills and a small team of freelance employees) from home. They say that this lifestyle allows them to balance childcare and take two months every winter visiting another part of the world (during the winter of fieldwork, they rented a house in Europe). Of 'creating' her 'own life,' Amy explained: 'I don't need to be fenced in and anything that I do. I don't need to have a piece of paper to show what I do. And I think that it's just an interesting way to create a life and a business. I take a lot of chances. I force myself into a position where I have to trust myself to move forward no matter what. Sometimes it works out and sometimes it really spectacularly does not work out. And it's all

good.'

Foucauldian (Foucault 1994; Foucault 1978) notions of power are useful to understand how and why individuals might opt into economic precarity. Why, for instance, does the creative class pursue lives governed by 'love for the job,' where they are often overworked, underpaid, or periodically jobless? Because participants in the system have collectively built pleasurable outlets, everything from the micro-scale joys of sipping a latte in an aesthetic café to the everyday availability of exotic consumables produced by a global marketplace. Choices are often made around pleasure, where poor labour conditions are overlooked in favour of the latest fashion even while touting the importance of hormone-free, local food. Neoliberalism has power because its talons are insidious: are cities like Providence building local economies that support small-scale business and 'urban makers', or are they building sites of pleasure that allow *some of us* to live outside of neoliberalism's bubble?

To elucidate a distinction between their participation in 'potentiality' and the creative approaches of many households to greater political and economic uncertainties, I want to draw attention here to the humility embedded in many of my participants' aspirations. Few of my participants were interested in extensive economic mobility or financial success. Instead their desires were aligned with the pursuit of happiness, wellbeing, and community. Joyce's (Chapter Four) aspiration was to retire, move to be near her daughter, and work part-time at Whole Foods. Nicole (Chapter Three), even with the upwards economic mobility granted by her fiancé's job, liked her job more than anyone I've ever met, which promised no further mobility and only a small increased salary over time; she had no intention of leaving other than to follow her fiancé. Luke and Amy built their own companies so that they could have a balance of time to care for their daughter and travel together as a family.

Adam (Chapters Four and Five) quit a secure job to build his own brand so that he could have the flexibility that going-solo offered. Billy (Chapter Three) was eager to start his own business to have the freedom to create. Russell (Chapter Three and Five) seemed to find joy in everything that he did: it was a mission and a practice that, even when it failed, had a renewable future.

Others highlighted the glass ceilings of their lives, but consistently recognised the value of what they had. One couple was frustrated by the insecurity of adjunct jobs, yet they loved what they did and had time to volunteer in organisations that gave them joy. Hannah and a few others both struggled with the demands of earning money at jobs they did not love, but they recognised that their work allowed time for their art. One participant did not particularly like his job, but he liked the security, and found solace in yoga. Many had, in the past, made changes in their lives so that they liked the everyday, so that they woke up and wanted to wake up, and saw within their futures periodic nuggets of good. Good was found in yoga and meditation, commensality, sex and human touch, oysters and wine, long walks, wild flowers, and dinner parties.

The insights above are threaded together to provide some insight into what emerges between my participants and their imaginings of the good life in Providence. While Providence has 'potential,' many participants recognise the glass ceiling of this potential and resituate their aspirations accordingly. While this could be read as people retrospectively changing their goals to sustain a sense of wellbeing, as Ortner (2003) also posits, I want to dig deeper into what constitutes the local good life. The disconnect between 'loneliness' and 'warmer and cooler' provides an insight: the atmosphere of a place cannot be easily captured because it is made in the in-between moments, the senses, the intangible, the mutability of people, objects, and seasons. While architecture and design attempt to create an experience

of a place, it is ultimately the habits and practices of the everyday that generate felt qualities.[33] Recognising that the imagining of Providence as an alternative way of life is rife with contradiction, I consider how place emerges as a felt sense.

THE ENDURING PRESENCE OF THE LOCAL

CAROLINA'S WAY of being in her home offers a different take on the integration of the local, one that is not solely material in nature, but rather sensory. Carolina really enjoyed Providence, but she did not seek to make it part of her visual identity—she rather liked to live it. The décor of her home, in contrast to the homes described earlier in this chapter, was carefully selected over time—*I don't own things I don't like,* she once told me. She acquired objects from travels, art from friends, antiques, and a variety of books that she displayed in her own careful order. For her, the local was more mutable, seasonal, and temporary. Whilst her objects carried her longer-term identity, from her prior life in Miami to her new life in New England, the local was appreciated in keeping the windows of her downtown apartment open in the summer, with the sounds of traffic and construction resonate in her apartment. Carolina expressed that she liked to feel a part of the city, not closed off from it. She was also diligent about collecting flowers on her walks throughout Providence, which also made her feel part of her surrounding environment. I accompanied Carolina on several walks and learned, in following her body's lead, about her slow engagement with the city. Attentive to her dog, Carolina would walk at times for over an hour, stopping for coffee at a

[33] These ideas are explored in earlier work on authenticity. Critical of the quest for 'authenticity,' Sharon Zukin (2010) suggests that authenticity begins as an aesthetic category with ties to youth and cultural consumers, but ultimately is connected to economics and power. In the quest for the 'local,' urban planners, developers, and entrepreneurs periodically miss the intimate attachments place which makes everyday life both durable and worth living, leading to the 'death' of authentic urban places.

café on another side of the city and getting her dog a bowl of water. In the summer, these slow walks offered time for conversation and reflection, and the possibility of running into friends and acquaintances, striking up conversations with strangers, and learning new things about the material fabric of the city each day. In the vein of the last chapter, these walks allowed for the pleasures of surprise. Carolina also frequently referred to them as a huge part of her ability to sustain wellbeing overtime, especially in warding off depression and anxiety, which had accompanied her most of her life.

Walking the city has been recognised as a research tool for investigating how people experience place through 'sense and sensescapes' (Savić 2017:2). This method draws on an extensive interest in the felt sense of a place to which anthropologists and geographers have attended to, particularly in relation to food and taste (Savić 2017; St. Maurice 2012; Probyn 2012). Writing of food in Kyoto, Japan, Greg de St. Maurice (St. Maurice 2012) argues that 'a place can be tasted in ways that are fully embodied and social' (118-119). He concludes:

> taste of place can only be discerned when one has acquired the requisite knowledge of what meaningfully differentiates a place from another. Such tastes, then, are socially and discursively produced. To say that the taste of place is a social phenomenon is not to dismiss the importance of foodways. To the contrary, it emphasizes the way that foodways are interwoven with other aspects of social life, including economics, health and healing, and identity politics. (119)

Following the work of Elspeth Probyn (2012), I show how 'taste' for oysters amongst some of my participants emerges both as a form of Bourdieu's (1979) distinction and as a felt sense of place. Linked to the sea, seasonality, and the penchant for locally produced food, oysters are rooted in Rhode Island locality. While oysters are trendy throughout the US,[34] Rhode Island's geography, laws, and economy make their presence unique and somewhat

[34] Oysters are at the 'adoption' stage, according to Datassential, when the trend is picked up by food trucks and fast-casual and casual-dining independent restaurants, as well as specialty grocery stores and gourmet food retailers (Thorn 2015).

ubiquitous. Utilising this example, I argue that subjective sensory experiences of pleasure that are connected to place can help sustain a sense of rootedness and belonging that add to the sustainment of wellbeing over time.

Writing of oysters in Loch Fyne, Scotland, Probyn (2012) describes taste as entangled in a web of relationships:

> [E]ating reminds us of the different ways we are connected: economically, globally, communally, and emotionally. [...] Oysters give us a taste of "somewhereness." Taste and tastes are forms of attachments: to the strangers who grow or produce food, to friendships, which are made and remade in commensality and sharing, to the soil and water, the factories, ships, oysters leases and abattoirs. Taste ties us to history just as it does to various economic relationships. (65)

Her essay tackles the frequent lament of the lack of authenticity in a global world by listening to the 'slow stories about the place of tastes and the tastes of places' (62), which are part of the 'intimate' entanglements of the local. She considers taste not as a marker of class (Bourdieu 1979), but as an experience of attachments through which the body learns its world. Citing Latour,[35] she writes: 'As the body becomes a sensitized medium, relations between different parts of the body vibrate differently in tandem with different aspects of the thing being tasted. This activity remaking the world, makes up new worlds' (67).

Oysters, Probyn (2012) considers, are good to think with, both in their 'strangeness' as creatures (their indeterminate sex, their ability to filter five litres of water in an hour) and as a meditation on taste over time and place. For Probyn, oysters separate humanity into two distinct camps: for and against. While the popularity of and access to oysters as food has changed over time, from a normal coastal resource to poor-people's food to a gourmet menu item, all in part mediated by the ecological health of the sea (MacKenzie 2007), Probyn's divide is constructed purely by people who like them and people who don't. In my

[35] Latour, Bruno. (2004). How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies. Body and Society. 10(2-3): 205-229.

own fieldwork, the oyster also took a local form. Raw oyster consumption was common amongst some participants, and became a point of access similar to sharing coffee or wine in other ethnographic studies of everyday life. In some cases, it was a signifier of friendship: to be able to share a platter of raw oysters at any number of the city's dollar oyster specials was to gain access to intimate social conversation—even with strangers who sat in neighbouring bar stools.

Oyster consumption has a long history in the Northeast. Early native populations are known to have eaten oysters, as middens, or waste-heaps, of oyster shells are found throughout in the Northeast: the Damariscotta River in Maine was considered the 'epicentre of oyster shucking' between 2,200 and 1,000 years ago (P. Smith 2012). Commercial fishing of the eastern oyster began in the Hudson River Estuary in the 1600s and collapsed in the early 1800s, possibly due to overfishing (Kirby 2004). Harvests declined sharply again between 1890 and 1940, and by 2004 oyster landings were only 1.3% of those in 1890 (MacKenzie 2007). Reasons for the decline included a fall in demand, particularly as consumers became more aware of disease-causing bacteria; competition with other foods; economic depressions; losses in labour; the Prohibition; environmental damage to oyster beds; neglect of seed beds; and disease (MacKenzie 2007). Historically, MacKenzie (2007) argues, 'the most prominent [reason for the decline of the Eastern oyster] was a falling consumer demand for oysters: The demand for oysters was not consistently strong as has been assumed.'

In 2004, Robert Rheault wrote in *The Providence Journal* how shellfish would help clean up the Rhode Island bays, which contained excessive nitrogen, leading to phytoplankton blooms and resulting in sometimes dangerously low oxygen levels. Rheault has a PhD in Biological Oceanography and was the President of an aquaculture operation,

Moonstone Oysters, for 26 years. He recognized that:

> For a relatively small investment we could augment the production and harvest of shellfish, which would have substantial benefits to the health of the bay. By spreading cultured shellfish seed we can increase the natural stocks by as much as one hundred times. This can be done either by private shellfish farms or through public enhancement seeding projects. For every 2,000 oysters or clams that are harvested, about a pound of nitrogen is removed.

Rhode Island now has an expansive, small-farm aquaculture economy. According to the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council report, there were 55 aquaculture farms in Rhode Island in 2014, totalling 206.2 acres (Beutel 2014). The report states: 'Oysters remained the number one aquaculture product with 7,547,132 sold for consumption, an increase of 1.1 million oysters from last year.' They cite a 24% 'growth in value for shellfish for consumption' increase from 2013 to 2014. The State is invested in increasing the market for local seafood products.[36] Oysters can be bought at the farmers market for about $10-12 a dozen. Restaurants generally serve raw oysters for $2-3 each, served with a slice of lemon, cocktail sauce, a mignonette, and/or their own special sauces. As drink specials (and thus happy hours) are illegal in Rhode Island, buck-a-shuck 'happy hour' specials have become a way to entice patrons to bars in the late afternoon. On almost any given night, there is somewhere to eat dollar oysters—making it a more affordable trend.

As methodologically attending to sensory worlds is difficult, Probyn describes how the 'ethnographer's body' necessarily 'becomes part of the process of attunement' (67). My own embodied experience is a part of my interactions with those participants with whom I shared raw oysters. Oysters are not just a savoury treat or a casual appetiser, but a small, swallowable object that provides an immediate sensory recollection of what "the Ocean

[36] According to Seafood Rhode Island, a website produced by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Division of Agriculture: 'The Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative has developed and implemented a plan that facilitates the marketing of local seafood products and has increased the demand for local seafood. Rhode Island aquaculture is a major part of the local seafood movement and in fulfilling the increasing demand for all seafood' ("Seafood Rhode Island" 2017).

state" is famous for: endless inlets of seacoast. A raw oyster is indeed rich with 'somewhereness,' as Probyn discerns. Their salty, mineral taste, sometimes tempered by lemon or mignonette or interrupted by a grain of sand, evokes the sea and, as Probyn too notices, the experience of flesh on flesh is somehow deeply embodied—a sensation that 'passes through membranes' (63). For me, it is a taste of summer, available long after summer's close.

In summer, the cities and towns around the bay settle into 'beach season:'[37] people leave Providence early with surf boards and coolers packed with drinks and snacks, and drive down to South County, perhaps Narragansett or Matunuck, where they will spend the morning lounging on the sand and swimming in the open sea. In the evenings they might go to one of the bay beaches—less clean for swimming, but perfect for a sunset picnic. Sometimes, on humid nights, the smell of the bay settles into the streets of downtown Providence: salty brine and sea foam, oil and dead fish, the mingling of mineral-soaked freshwater, a reminder of both the decomposition and waste of urban living. To go 'to the beach' also means to drive away from the thick smell of oil and pollution evident in Providence's tidal river, until only the salted briny ocean air remains, now mingled with sunscreen and the dry, calcified scent of shells and sand. The sickly-sweet presence of the bay in Providence is equally a reminder of the freedoms that summer brings.

The shift towards warm weather and lighter days in May of 2015 made a difference in many participants' lives. On the first weekend that was over 70 degrees Fahrenheit (21 Celsius), Mary and Molly took their parents to Newport. *Everything is 'lighter' and better when the weather is nice,* Mary noted. *Isn't it interesting how that suddenly happens?* Nicole and I once

[37] As 'the Ocean State,' Rhode Island has over 400 miles of coastline and over 100 public and private beaches, attracting tourists from neighbouring New England states, particularly those that have summer homes in Rhode Island.

discussed summer in Rhode Island at length, particularly the 'energy' that accompanies it. People go 'crazy' in summer, she said, especially during heat waves. She remembered one summer, when she was single and dating, with nostalgia—it was a summer filled with drinks on the decks of Hot Club (a favourite bar with a dock on Providence's tidal river), fleeting summer love, and questionable decisions made in the enduring heat. As a sensory modality, heat is a part of the making of this 'crazy' atmosphere, encouraging a shared 'heated sociality' in the city (Potter 2008).[38] While the sharing of summer heat is evident in Nicole's reflection, the heat of summer can also be stagnating and isolating.[39] Others reflected how 'quick' everything became in summer. Rachel and Amy both expressed, in different terms, that they always fantasise about having more time and space with the good weather to be outside or to go to the beach, but that summer just ends up getting filled with activities, thus passing quickly. In the home, the atmosphere of summer is often met with adoration, particularly after the harsh New England winters. Whereas dirt and salt and carefully kept out in winter, a certain amount of sand is expected and anticipated in the home. The sea is also drawn into the home through the regular collection of shells, beach stones, and sea glass and the lingering smell of the bay that is heightened on humid nights.

As July's heat waves give way to violent thunderstorms, and August's rolling restlessness feeds into the returning routine of September, my own oyster consumption begins to rise, and I savour the taste of the sea—and the taste of different waters—that each oyster provides (the taste of the sea is exactly why some people do not like oysters). There is something about this evocation of the sea, and thus Rhode Island coastal living, that makes

[38] Caroline Potter (2008) considered heat as a sense of energy that encourages connection amongst dancers in London.

[39] Senses of heat vary. Periodic heat waves (~32-37 degrees Celsius, with high humidity) throughout July and August can leave people sluggish and eager for temperature to return to 'normal' (~26-32 degrees Celsius). While many households have air-conditioning, especially those with elderly residents or children, others prefer to 'adjust' to the temperature of summer and leave their windows open.

the oyster stand out in my fieldwork. As an economic resource, a source of pleasure, a means of transport, and a threat, 'the sea has always triggered people's imaginations,' Markus Balkenhol and Michiel Swinkels (2015) write. For humans, they conclude, 'the sea may be seen as both a boundary separating one world from the other and as a portal that allows access and thus all kinds of circulation between the landlocked and the marine world, the rich from the poor, and the physical from the spirit world' (11). It is this imaginative capacity, this in-betweenness, and connectedness that make the sea incredibly valuable to the human creation of meaning. In Rhode Island, there is also something in the seasonality of the sea: as with the Funeral for the Plants, which marked the turning of the harvest season, the sea is connected to the rhythms of life: to the tides, the moon, and the temperatures of seasonal change. Perhaps oysters also capture the imaginative capacity and seasonal inspiration of the sea.

Along with facilitating coming together, the sharing of oysters with participants provided contrasts to my own experience. I take the example of Paige, who tried her first oyster at 34 years old, at a tasting event designed to teach the university community about local foods. While a staunch vegan with her past boyfriend, Paige had begun to diversify her diet by buying local raw cheeses from the farmers market and eating oysters. *Oysters have no central nervous system and are high in many of the nutrients vegans need,* she offered in explanation. *Plus*, she added, *they help clean up the bay*, signalling her environmental consciousness.

Paige's initial struggle with detaching the oyster from the shell reminded me of the messiness of the creature, and the disappointment that can emerge from losing the brine, but also the vulnerability inspired by one's first taste. When the owner of a local aquaculture farm, Walrus and Carpenter Oysters, handed Paige her first oyster, she asked me to explain what to do. I showed her how to loosen the place where the oyster was still attached to the

shell, and then tip the oyster into your mouth. *That's it!* I said as she struggled with the first one.

Oh, I think I get it now, you have to kind of suck it, she said afterwards.

I looked at her, considering, and said, *it's kind of like a little flick of the tongue underneath.*

Ew, she said, and went for another.

Although Paige would become a convert, her first experience was fraught with ambivalence. Unlike other first-timers, who made a judgment based primarily on texture and taste, Paige seemed determined to like oysters. Although she never said why, I considered that many in her social circle—professionals and artists in their twenties and thirties—frequently went out for oyster specials and I assumed some element of social pressure, the 'trendiness' factor, made her inclined to like oysters before she even tried one. I asked other Rhode Island vegans I met during fieldwork if they too ate oysters; this too was indeed a trend. Oysters are thus given socio-political meaning: they signify ethical engagement with the local and healthiness, core elements of bourgeois taste in the Northeast.

For those in the 'for' camp, oysters are a pleasurable evocation of place. They are an example of how the senses are entangled in the making of ecological entrepreneurship, the consumption of trends, and the body. They help elucidate how local tastes, senses, and atmospheres help maintain a sense of joy attached to a place. I posit that the sensory local engagement can captivate the body: it connects the body to the moment, drawing the mind away from worries or hopes about the future or concerns from the past. Anna Tsing (2015) begins her book on mushrooms with a meditation on the very stabilising quality that ecological commodities (like the oyster) can provide. She writes: 'What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk, and if I'm really lucky, I find mushrooms. Mushrooms pull me back to my senses, not just–like flowers–through their riotous colours

and smells but because they pop up unexpectedly, reminding me of the good fortune of just happening to be there. Then I know that there are still pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy' (1). Rhode Island oysters were a way to be present in a place with others. They connected strangers and friends alike through a shared notion of pleasure, which produced a type of public elation. What I like to call the 'glow' of a local favourite, New Rivers restaurant on dollar oyster Tuesdays, is made in part by the lighting—strings of fairy lights knotted together with wild vines—and in part the public commensality around the bar.

This notion of sharing creating a 'glow' is echoed in the previous chapter, where The Funeral for the Plants brought Hannah and me into a new state of pleasure, assuaging earlier anxieties about the uncertain future. The embracing of uncertainty—simply in talking a walk as experienced by Tsing and Carolina—opens the possibility of surprise engagement with local ecology. In the discussion, I return to the notion that the home can foster a sense of sanctuary in an uncertain world, and argue that joyous sensory engagements with the ecology of place may also assuage greater global and national uncertainties.

DISCUSSION

ALIGNED WITH the notion of atmosphere, the sensory 'local' is mutable, subjectively felt, and culturally-shaped (Bille 2013). The local emerges not just as an economic project, but also as a lived experience tied to the environment, ethical engagement, and friendship. I show that while some networks of 'culture'—development agencies, city governments, businesses—attempt to create atmospheres and ambiance through architecture, objects, and tastes, the enduring presence of 'the local' lies in the interaction between humans and their

environments. Materials, narratives, and atmosphere, as described in this thesis so far, all intertwine to give local identity presence.

I began by arguing that Providence 'local' identity emerges as an alternative to the national, grounded in small-scale potential for the individual and collective future. The contested imaginings of the city, however, are marked by the limits of this potential. I shed light on what I call the 'humble aspirations' of my participants within the bounded structures of this potential. However, I wanted to elucidate a distinction between their participation in and acceptance of the confines of neoliberalism and how their aspirations also create and sustain wellbeing under greater scales of political and economic uncertainty.[40]

This chapter leads me to question if the attainable pleasures of the local can assuage uncertainty by sustaining 'atmospheres of wellbeing,' as defined in the preceding chapter. It is possible that the uncertainty of the precarious cultural economy and the tumultuous nation-state are assuaged by the quality of local, ecological relationships. Oysters connect people to one another, to local ecology, and to 'somewhereness,' and as such provide a visceral experience that is both imaginative, real, and happening in the present moment. They also attach people to the pleasures of the local economy, and as such do not wholly reject capitalism or class distinction. Like Carolina's walks in the city, they are a meditative practice of the body, stilling the mind without one evening knowing they are being quieted and engaged. Like the ways that the body learns to attend to ambiguity through atmospheric engagement (Chapter Five), experiences that make the body joyous in the present moment teach it how to know pleasure. These pleasures do not have to be over commodities, like

[40] The various 'ethical' engagements of some of my participants in some ways mirrors Gougeon's (2010) observation about the transcendentalists' discomfort with the 'ruthless excesses of the economy' in the 19th century, suggesting that there is a history legacy of subcultures both participating in and rejecting capitalism. While they took part in capitalism, he notes, they 'sought to alter it in ways that would make it more humane and conducive to the dignity and well-being of all people, especially the working class' (137).

oysters. In fact, I propose, the only thing that makes oysters function in this way is because they are so often shared. Solitary engagements with place may have the same effect: Tsing's walks in the woods, Carolina's walks with her dog, and my own escapes to the beach sustain a sense of possibility even when the world feels too much.

In the next section, which is written in part as a transition to my conclusion, I explore the tension between participant engagement in the pleasures promised by neoliberalism and the concurrent practices that sustain hope.

The American Dream: Instilling Hope as a Way of Life

'HOPE' IN RHODE ISLAND is a point of State pride. The word 'hope' appears on the official state seal, under the 'hope anchor,' a symbol that has been with Rhode Island since 1636, the year of the colony's founding, likely inspired by the biblical phrase 'hope we have as an anchor of the soul' (Chapin 1930). Just as Micah Salkind (2016) highlights Rhode Island cultural workers' penchant for mythologizing Roger Williams as a cultural leader, hope too is embedded in cultural-led urban regeneration. 'Hope' was also the national call in Obama's 2008 election campaign, including a poster circulated by Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) graduate Shepard Fairey. With the end of Obama's presidency, and a new slogan taking the stage, *Make American Great Again*, the liberal Northeast was left suspended in a state of political uncertainty. On the one hand, this time *felt* worse than ever before, but this type of uncertainty occurs every four years. Both hope and remaking are fundamental to the American way of life.[41]

[41] Writing of the 'political economy of hope' in genetic medicine, Carlos Novas (2006) reflects that 'to have or to 'live in' hope means to take an active stance towards the future so that the possibilities and

Recognising an innate need to 'organize the inchoate sensations amid which we pass our days—pain, desire, pleasure, fear—into a story,' humanities scholar Andrew Delbanco (2000) describes how when 'story leads somewhere and thereby helps us navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope' (1). This is the premise of a series of lectures (William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies) that were formed into a book entitled, *The Real American Dream*. Pitting hope against melancholy, Delbanco explores 'three basic phases of American history' 'by which Americans have tried to save themselves from the melancholy that threatens all reflective beings' (11). This 'history of hope' highlights how Americans have first looked to God, in its Puritan foundations, and then to the 'deified nation.' Now, he argues, we live in a phase where 'the idea of transcendence has detached itself from any coherent symbology' (5):

> It continues to be pursued through New Age spirituality, apocalyptic environmentalism, and the 'multicultural' search for ancestral roots; but our most conspicuous symbols […] are the logos of corporate advertising—the golden arches and the Nike swoosh. Though vivid and ubiquitous, such symbols will never deliver the indispensible feeling that the world does not end at the borders of the self.'

Drawing on Tocqueville's accounts, Delbanco also recognises that Americans have a long history of 'voluntary associations:' the freedom to find their own communities that can be 'soul-saving' (114). Yet, he warns:

> They are clubbish and resolutely local, and unlikely to lead outward toward a sense of connection with an overarching human community […] This sapping of symbolic power from transcendent ideas such as God and nation cannot, in the end, be replenished by intensified local commitments—because the most urgent problems of our times are not local problems (114-115)

There is truth in this statement and it echoes the conundrum that this thesis leaves me with: how do we disentangle the useful, beautiful, and sometimes accidental ways in which people

potentiality inherent in the present may be rendered achievable. Hope can thus structure the lives of individuals and families affected by illness. Furthermore, hope is both individual and collective: it ties together personal biographies, collective hopes for a better future, and broader social, economic and political processes' (291).

make their everyday lives work, and work well, from what I might call their 'absent participation' in global capitalism and the making of a new America? By 'absent participation' I mean that all of the households studied participate in global, late-capitalist society, even if they think they disengage. Those who made decisions to live 'differently' or 'alternatively' still exist within the confines of American ideologies and corporate globalisation that they reject. Many also selectively reject the external world but find themselves embedded in it nonetheless, desiring Starbucks or drinking Budweiser, 'needing' a car and or wanting to travel globally. So they participate, but they consistently resituate themselves locally and different from the 'American Other.' Is this just an expression of both class and distinction, as the story of Paige's desire to eat oysters might suggest, while they are actually frozen in the confines of neoliberal convenience?

I return to the idea of the 'humble aspirations' I described earlier in this chapter when I reflected on many participants' love of the 'potential' of Providence. What I find peculiar about many of my participants is their trust—perhaps a faith—that life will turn out well and that they will be successful (although this is not true for all, and I have given counter-examples throughout). This goes against their worries about climate change or the US government, against projections about future costs of living and threats of further financial disaster. Many are blindly, even passionately, hopeful about their own individual lives; when things go wrong, it is temporary.

Where does this mind-set come from? I first visit the concept of 'manifestation,' which suggests that things happen without physical action, such as hard work, but through the invisible powers of 'energy.' Energy can attract or repel the networks needed to manifest one's desires. While my participants did not spell this out for me at any point during fieldwork, many spoke of 'creating' their own lives. Embedded in the use of the word

'creating' are not just hard work (on the self and social relationships), but the idea that *intention* matters. *Thinking* good would happen is seen as a part of *making* good happen. The best-selling self-help book *The Secret* in 2006 is testament to the prevalence of this belief system. The book is based on the 'law of attraction,' or the belief that focused positive or negative thoughts will attract positive or negative energies. It is related to 'creative visualization,' or the sense that the future is imagined before it is made. New Age spiritualists and the business world have both grasped onto this concept, which ultimately promises that the success can be formed purely by magical manifestation through positive thought. This thinking extends to the State: as Graeber (2012) recalls, an aide of President George W. Bush once stated: "'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality'" (28).

The neoliberal economic model in general is recognised to be successful because of its ability to seem like an innate component of human life (Lemke 2002; Read 2009; Foucault 1979). This sets up a problematic encounter for the lay individual, who has no other option but to believe in the system, or attempt to reject it without even really understanding what 'the system' is to begin with. Even what has become an educated, politically liberal quest for scientific truth is entangled in this economic system. While some desire to step outside of this system, they are ultimately embroiled in its ideological offshoots. What makes neoliberalism successful is in part its ability to sell itself as part of an innate, natural law and in part that it offers pleasure, or at least, the promise of pleasure, to a large number of people. A Foucauldian perspective reminds that power is both insidious and productive, offering pleasure to those who make and partake in it (Foucault 1994).

The dominance of the neoliberal model, in both economics and everyday life, may contribute to my observation that there is a rising interest in 'manifesting' the good life. The first component here is the ways in which neoliberal logic has become an 'intimate part of

how our lives and subjectivity are structured' (Read 2009:35); a form of governmentality extended to the individual body and self (Foucault 1978b; Rose 1992). Within this rationale, the individual is an 'entrepreneur' of the self, 'seeking to maximize its own powers, its own happiness, its own quality of life, through enhancing its autonomy' (N. Rose 1992). Success can be *created* just by deciding it is so. As I stated above, *thinking* good would happen is seen as a part of *making* good happen.

As I have argued throughout, neoliberal thinking is part of a longer legacy of American capitalism. For instance, trust in the future is embedded in the concept of 'divine providence,' evoking the protective care of god and divine omniscience. This concept gives us some insight into the magical thinking resonate in early colonial days, when uncertainty about life's continuity from one year to the next was particularly high. Max Weber's (1905), conceptualisation of providence as 'a calling' for men to labour within God's will also falls into this logic. The Puritan concept of the calling emphases the 'methodical character of worldly asceticism' centred on the pleasures of work, so that God's favour is established through material success. Today, neoliberal magic has taken the place of divine providence.

This type of thinking was shaken after the 2008 recession, when the cracks of neoliberalism began to become more visible through the popularity of *Occupy Wall Street* (Heiman 2015; Graeber 2012; Robbins 2015). What was possible if the 1% had most of the world's material wealth? My intuitive hypothesis is that the rising interest in secular spiritual practices, such as the ritual at the Funeral for the Flowers (Chapter Five), Trisha and other's tarot readings (Chapter Three), and even altars (Chapter Five) is resultant from the rising uncertainty of the failing neoliberal climate. Instead of actually 'manifesting,' these hopeful practices help manage feelings of uncertainty, functioning similarly to notions of luck in other cultures (Graeber 2012).

However, Weber's Puritan providence provides some insight into how my participants' attend to these greater changes and uncertainties through neoliberal magical thinking. Laced within Puritan providence is essentially human action in the form of work. Herein lies another truth of American notions of manifestation embedded in the American Dream: it is not positive-thinking at all, but layers of unrecognised improvisation that sustains both the reality and illusion of happiness, wellbeing, and potential. I have illustrated herein how my participants set up their homes, narrate their lives, and produce experiences that negotiate the everyday uncertainty of living. They approach the American Dream in the same way: recognising its limits (no one will be rich) they seek happiness and success on a scale small enough for their aspirations to come true. It is a refurbished American Dream: belonging to others as well, they make it their own.

Ultimately, this type of thinking does not 'manifest' a new world, it manages the uncertainty of the process of creating it. While many of my participants have what I might call blind conviction, the thought process of 'manifestation' is ultimately about generating 'positive energy' within the self and with others. It is about sustaining a subjective perspective that life is good. Making room for creativity (or divine luck, as the word *providence* might suggest) and sustaining trust that the everyday world continues is a part of encouraging Providence to emerge and grow within and against greater national and global discourses.

I turn now to my conclusion, drawing these wider cultural observations together with the data presented in this thesis.

Chapter Seven - Discussion

THE AFTERMATH: PROVIDENCE AS A CITY OF HOPE

WHEN I RETURNED to Providence the summer after fieldwork, a change in State law allowing panhandling resulted in a high proportion of the city's intersections being unusually manned by people holding cardboard signs. While I noticed an extreme increase in panhandlers, I did not realise it was due to a change in law until a young woman at an intersection in the West End said to me: *I'm so glad I can stand here and don't have to worry about going to prison.*

That is good, I responded, smiling, before the light changed and I drove on.

The sudden appearance of 'begging' made some people uncomfortable. One man I spoke with felt the city was 'out-of-line' on this one and really needed to do something about it. On the beach one afternoon, I overheard a city-dweller complain that no business was going to invest in the city. He described the dirty streets and the smell of urine (having lived and travelled to many other cities, I personally think of Providence as relatively clean), ending with his dislike of the panhandling. The visibility of homelessness did not make these people feel as though they should do something to help, it made them feel deeply uncomfortable, almost angry. It shattered the vision of Providence as a city of endless opportunity, a vision that would bring investment, tourists, and the accompanying economic growth. The visibility interrupted an imagined sense that that life was okay: the middle class bubble of Providence's potential was falling apart.

The panhandlers put a visible damper on the beginning of summer, capsizing the

hope that had been docked in the harbour all winter: the hope that the melancholy of winter would be lifted by the aesthetics of a consumable summer season. Instead of a pretty drive to the beach marked by coolers filled with fruit, sandwiches, and beer and windows rolled down in the rising morning heat, people were caught in their cars at the red light before the ramp onto the highway, wondering if they should give away some money, or just a bit of food. Guilt was felt, if not articulated. Of course, for those now allowed to stand on the street, hope appeared differently. It was both simple and alive. It was for food, money, and not going to prison. Hope for the laws to protect them. Hope for shelter that was not dangerous. Hope for human connection, just as Kevin and Laura articulated in Chapter Six. Those who desired to *make America great again,* the Republican election slogan, also had hope.

Reality hit, for many of my liberal and/or Democrat participants, soon after my fieldwork concluded. From April 2015-April 2016, I had caught many in a moment of potential and possibility. In the months leading up to the 2016 election, many began to express fear and concern about neighbours who wanted to vote for the Republican presidential candidate or friends who refused to vote on account of Bernie losing the primary (which, to some, was an action that would only help the republicans). Hillary supporters, who during the primaries had been resoundingly quiet, were just beginning to emerge, battling what some called the deeply ingrained sexism of US politics. Most, who feared the ascendency of the US's next president, were shocked when Hilary Clinton lost the election. I collected insights from Facebook posts and emails, and a later visit to some households in September 2017. The outcome of the 2016 election put a shadow over their lives. When Mayor Jorge Elorza named Providence a 'sanctuary city,' or a city that does not enforce federal immigration laws, several participants expressed joy and relief on Facebook. As a Northeasterner, I also knew what they were thinking: despite the great uncertainty that

the new president placed over America's future, we could rest assured that life in the Northeast probably would not change *that* much. Slowly the Facebook posts were littered with the usual: announcements of new babies, photos of new apartments, weddings and engagements. There was hope in everyday life. On the street, I was struck most by one homeless man who picked a little bunch of wild flowers and put them in an empty bottle on the concrete next to wear he stood. While I did not see the man again, a week later the flowers were still there, dried in the bottle, a reminder of his little vision of beauty.

Hope, potential, adaptability, resilience, wellbeing. These words appear in this thesis contrary to participant reports of anxiety, depression, and insecurity, but they are not divergent from everyday uncertainty. Everyday uncertainty is all of these things and can provoke unease just as much as it inspires creativity. In this final chapter, I discuss the ways in which everyday uncertainty has taken form throughout this thesis and then return to the notion of wellbeing. I conclude by considering the impact of home-based research on uncertainty and wellbeing in the US context.

REVISITING 'EVERYDAY UNCERTAINTY'

I RETURN FIRST to some of my introductory statements about everyday uncertainty. Many anthropological accounts of uncertainty have focused on conditions of precarity or vulnerability, including a significant amount of literature on the African continent (Cooper and Pratten 2015). In the West, accounts are more likely to focus on 'risk' or the insecurity inspired by market liberal conditions (Gusterson and Besteman 2010). The former have highlighted the productive and resourceful nature of uncertainty; uncertainty is recognised to be an everyday experience that is negotiated within social and material relations (Cooper and

Pratten 2015). Others have attended to elements of uncertainty in the West under different anthropological frameworks, such as class or everyday ethics (Heiman 2015; Mattingly 2014b). The present account draws attention to 'everyday uncertainty' as banal, highlighting that the middle class is consistently surrounded by experiences and conditions that could be described as uncertain. Some are acute, some are chronic, and most have to do with an experience of the unknown.

I return here to the idea that vagueness should be taken seriously (Bille 2015), which in many ways echoes the methodological difficulties of attending to indeterminacy (Csordas 1993) and the senses (Probyn 2012). While the anthropological method thrives on ambivalence (Kierans and Bell 2017) and often records ambivalence on the part of interlocutors, few have attended to the experience of uncertainty as an everyday affair. As everyday uncertainty itself is ambiguous (Boholm 2003), something that is difficult to give form to, I posed the possibility that uncertainty was a *negative space* that could be seen through the *positive space* of participant encounters (Chapter One). The *positive spaces* in this case are objects and practices in the home. Through this collage, I posited that everyday uncertainty would take form.

Chapter Three introduces the first building block of everyday uncertainty: the experience of insecurity. Everyday uncertainty takes form through the embodied, individual experiences of insecurity, particularly the threat of future insecurity and ontological insecurity. Material insecurity is uncertain because supplies are not certain while ontological or emotional insecurity is an experience that changes life-as-we-know-it. Through this chapter I find that individual experiences of uncertainty are mediated through relationships with the self, others, and the material environment in which we exist. This is a core finding of the thesis.

Chapter Four introduces the second component of everyday uncertainty: uncertain circumstances, from the banal to the traumatic. These include the outcome of a job change, the uncertainty of love after marital separation, and the outcome of an IVF procedure. In pairing uncertain circumstance with biographical framings, I find that individual's capabilities to make sense of the past in light of current circumstances and the potential future are key insights into how they negotiate uncertainty on an individual level. The 'capacity to aspire' (Fischer 2014) seems to matter for participants' senses of wellbeing. Narrative co-construction between couples and other household members is also vital in transferring individual-level insights to the social household. This chapter suggests that the perceived quality of communication in the home—both verbal and non-verbal—is important for attending to the unexpected.

Chapter Five suggests that wellbeing and uncertainty are ultimately bound together in the everyday. Unlike uncertainty, which is presented as a framework of analysis, wellbeing is encapsulated in the methodological work of this thesis. Participants were asked directly about wellbeing (but not about experiences of uncertainty). My findings suggest that while everyday uncertainty is negotiable, mediated both by temporary fixes and longer-term changes, the sustainment of wellbeing over time is harder to achieve. Participants rely in part on short-term pursuits of happiness, particularly around socialising with friends over food and drink, which also serve to mitigate uncertainty. Many participants also construct their lives around wellbeing, engaging in activities that they think sustain wellbeing. These consist of meditation, yoga, exercise, eating 'well,' and having regular, often ritualised family time or socialisation. In Chapter Five I explore how attempts to sustain wellbeing can also include creating an atmospheric presence in the home. Sustaining an atmosphere requires attention to the in-betweenness of everyday life: the emotional, affective, sensory details of space that

make up the atmosphere of the home. While on the one hand this type of work is a capability that can alleviate the difficulties confronted during transition and change, I also argue that in learning to engage with the unknown in a visual, material, and sensory level helps the body learn how to negotiate larger experiences of the unknown. The material world in which we exist—which includes the ephemeral experience of space—is something to come back to when things fall apart.

This idea is carried forward into Chapter Six, which increases the scales of everyday uncertainty. As elements of the outside world come into the home through news media, visits with friends, the internet, and other everyday flows of goods and knowledge, larger political and economic uncertainties can effect home life. I argue that engagement in the local, particularly sensory engagements with the local ecology of place, helps assuage their perceptions of greater national and global uncertainties. As with the everyday material culture of the home, the greater material environment in which people exist can provide a space for exploring the positive surprises of uncertainty.

Ultimately, everyday uncertainty emerges as deeply relational and temporal, existing in the in-between. It shifts form and function depending on interactions with the social and material world and draws on the past and projects into the future. It also emerges as both ontologically challenging and as a place for creative improvisation: while the unknown future can spark anxiety and fear, it is also full of potential. Uncertainty also emerges through its opposition to certainty. Certainty, I posit, is the abnormal experience of everyday life, while uncertainty is merely a part of the process of living. A question emerges for me here: are contemporary notions of 'rising' uncertainties or 'uncertain worlds' actually related to the growing regularity of supposed 'certainty,' particularly in the form of scientific or mathematical fact? This is echoed in other accounts of risk and uncertainty, particularly in

Western societies (see below) (Gusterson and Besteman 2010; Crawford 2006). As a positive form—a thing—certainty may have a 'social life' (Appadurai 1986), morphing as it enters different contexts and takes on meaning. As such, even certainty is uncertain.

WHO SHOULD 'MANAGE' UNCERTAINTY? THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY AND THE EMBRACING OF AMBIGUITY

MAGIC, PROBABILITY, and providence are all means to manage uncertainty because they provide an explanation for unexplained outcomes and can encourage trust in the unknown of the future (Chapter Six) (Graeber 2012). They also can exacerbate uncertainty by drawing attention to possible outcomes, which might otherwise have remained unknown. This is similar to what Graeber (2012) calls 'the paradox of performativity': 'If someone is directing a charm against you—love medicine, for example, or something intended to make you ill or drive you insane—it can work only if you know about it and if you actually believe that it will work' (37). Similarly, as mentioned in the introduction, awareness of risk can make an individual feel out of control (Crawford 2006). In sum, uncertainty *cannot be managed* by the *individual*. Any attempts to do so run the risk of augmenting its unsettling capacity. Instead, uncertainty is *consistently negotiated*, in the actions and encounters of the everyday.

Individual capabilities are mediated by material security. The participants in this study rely on a trust that the material, social, and subjective worlds will remain intact. The dismantling of one or more of these worlds—by circumstance or threat—makes everyday life both affectively and materially precarious. Poverty, loneliness, and depression are all examples of changes to these three systems that can leave one's sense of ontological security in question.

As Appadurai (2013) highlights, those who are better off are 'more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs' (188). Material security, this suggests, offers capacities beyond basic survival that are continuously reintegrated into the habitus of the middle class (Bourdieu 1977; 1979). The deepening of self-cultivation and self-reflexivity, for instance, is learned from parents and taught to children and the extent to which they are expected varies by learning environments encountered as we grow; this is highlighted by the 'social ecological memory' (Barthel, Parker, and Ernstson 2015) of how to live in the home (Chapter Four). Taste is also about distinction—maintaining a habitus of liberal ethical living—as much as it is about the privilege of learning what works and what does not in everyday engagements with space (Bourdieu 1977; 1979). I also consider the trust in the future, inspired by magical thinking or providence, as a part of the middle class habitus: the trust that life will continue, and continue well (Chapter Six).

The striking nuance of everyday uncertainty is that while individuals and households can implement methods to negotiate (not manage) uncertainty, they are ultimately bound by greater social, economic, and politic structures. This raises a question for me: how critical should we be of these individual capabilities? I argue that the criticism should be centred on the US's failings at securing basic material security for a large number of people, which exacerbates the potential for falling that even middle class Americans affectively feel (Heiman 2015). In this thesis, I considered some of the bounds within which the middle class finds itself. I now suggest that my participants pursue two basic American ideals (happiness and the American Dream) in the form of what I call 'humble aspirations' (Chapter Six). While they may not consider themselves typical 'Americans,' they are deeply

embedded in the making of new American futures.

In this context, where 'the pursuit of happiness' has long been recognised as an individual right, people struggle to sustain happiness. Some have argued that Americans have turned to pharmaceuticals and other drugs to suspend the illusion that happiness in attainable and permanent (Caplan and Elliott 2004; Elliot 2003). Many of the participants in my own research recognise that 'happiness' is not a constant, and instead of seeking happiness, they set their sights on the long-term goal of living a good life. Contrary to the common assumption that Americans are extreme individualists, many of their decisions are made around family and friendships, including relationships with animals. However, many make consistent decisions to disassociate or limit time with family and friends who do not fall into their individual or nuclear family perspective on what constitutes the good life.

In Chapter Six, I draw attention to the humility embedded in my participants' aspirations. The ethnography throughout suggests that my participants have re-scaled the American Dream. Having undergone various traumas, lost love ones and friends, found themselves crumbled by the failings of love, and losing jobs and needing to move homes, many of the households in this study have had to 'start over' numerous times. They are not pleasantly caught in the comforts of wealth, but rather show various scales of creative improvisation (Ingold and Hallam 2007) that have led them to their current lives. Aware that everyday life is uncertain, some see the potential for creativity in life's ambiguity. Others learn to cope with the challenges life presents them with, carefully setting up their lives to avoid conflict.

My participants' everyday lives were deeply embedded in the desire to be happy with what they could potentially have. These aspirations were not for the Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs) and 'McMansion' homes of 1990s suburbia (Heiman 2015); rather, recognising their

economic limits, most households strove for the *good enough life*. Their aspirations are deeply embedded in context. The cultural economy of Providence, including inexpensive homes, gourmet restaurants at reasonable prices, and even the ubiquity of the once class-signifying delicacy of oysters, offered them a place in which they could live both simply and well (see Chapter Two and Six). The title, *Encouraging Providence*, plays on traditional meanings of the word *providence,* evoking the protective care of God or nature as a spiritual power, luck or opportunity, and the state of quality of being provident (Merriam-Webster). In writing of uncertainty, wellbeing, and new American futures, I see that *providence* is still a cornerstone of the Providence way of life, and that encouraging both providence and Providence–through a combination of hard work, inventive preparation, and trust–is embedded in my participants' narratives around the good life.

While it is obvious from this ethnography that not everyone was happy all the time, and that many struggled through the hardships of illness, grief, depression, and anxiety, I was struck by so many participants' willingness to live within the everyday and engage with things that brought them joy. The pursuit of wellbeing is indeed a pursuit, and success was found when this pursuit was small-scale and interconnected to their social lives and environment. The city has problems. The US has problems. But placed within and against their everyday realities, these people were fairly successful in sustaining small-scale happiness. Part of this success, I argue, is learning to embrace everyday uncertainty.

ONE OF MY FIRST insights into the value of embracing uncertainty was when my uncle, who trains and manages large teams of fire fighters on the ground during disastrous forest fires in the US and Canada, explained to me how difficult it was to get his personnel to use common sense instead of following protocol. While protocol exists for a reason, he

explained, in life or death situations it takes a combination of keen observation, common senses, and intuition to get yourself and company out of harm's way. Protocol, in these instances, closes down the mind—people again and again miss the obvious, and this is what kills them, he explained to me. He told me he was using Simon's and Chabris' 'Selective Attention Test,' or the 'invisible gorilla' video, which asks viewers to count how many times the players wearing white pass the ball.[42] The other players are wearing black and in the middle of the video, a person wearing a gorilla costume walks through the room. Half of the people who watch the video do not see the gorilla because they are so focused on counting the ball.

While my uncle did not use the term 'uncertainty' it got me thinking about how we often do not notice what we are not looking for. Jamie Holmes' (2015) interview with a former FBI hostage negotiator, Gary Noesnor, similarly revealed the importance of remaining open when undergoing high-stakes negotiation. Holmes writes of his interview: 'Effective negotiations, he told me, have at least one thing in common: "They're all people who can dwell fairly effectively in the areas of gray, in the uncertainties and ambiguities of life" (95). Holmes goes on to explore our 'natural urge to demolish ambiguous evidence or deny ambivalent intentions' (108), suggesting that a high tolerance for ambiguity is not something we've valued in Western society, but which appears to be increasingly important. Helga Nowotny (2016) considers the same dynamic in the sciences: a good scientist must always balance the need to keep options open and to discern outcomes.

These examples draw primarily on psychology and human mental capacity, and led me to question, as I was conducting my fieldwork, what an anthropological perspective might add. What triggers the desire to reach a conclusion or make a decision that might close

[42] The video: www.theinvisiblegorilla.com/gorilla_experiment.

down other perspectives and options? How do the micro-scales of power affect these decisions? What are we actually negotiating in the everyday that might prevent us from being good negotiators, or make us better? What types of home environments encourage ambiguity? And was embracing uncertainty actually better for wellbeing? Before I answered these questions I realised I needed to ask a much simpler set of questions, to not presume I already knew something about human psychology: how do people negotiate uncertainty in the everyday? How do people sustain wellbeing? Are these practices related? These questions became the makings of this thesis.

For much of fieldwork I considered Rachel and Adam (Chapters Four and Five) as extremely effective at negotiating uncertainty: while they were confronted with a long period of unknown outcomes, they managed to stay relatively 'well.' They did not appear stressed, their lives didn't fall apart, they didn't turn to 'quick fixes' (e.g. alcohol), and they did not become angry or despondent. Throughout, I point to how their practices of wellbeing contributed to a home environment that was capable of managing the unknowns they were presented with: regular meditation and yoga practice, extensive communication, and maintain a positive energy in the home space. On later reflection I realised that what Rachel cultivated in her home was essentially a very structured structure of practices that consciously contributed to the management of the body, self, relationships, and the space. Her structure, however, had room for malleability built into it, which meant that when things went wrong, from spilled food to a car accident, their lives could bend around it in a supportive fashion. This structure took three very firm legs: a strong reflexive relationship with the self, a strong communicative relationship with her family, and a strong bond to the aesthetics of the environment (which, at a base level, required material security).

This structure travels, but takes different forms. In Rose's household, for instance, I

heard how her relationship with herself was strongly mediated by a set hour at the gym each morning, her one space of solitude; she did not mention self-reflection, but community was important in terms of the quality of time spent with family and friends, and the environment needed to support this community (Chapter Five). The structure also faced frequent negotiation under transition: when couples move in together, for instance, all three facets are in flux. As Chloe and Bruce's experience suggested to me, it takes the togetherness component being already quite strong to find peace with the other two. The combination of disliking their home, struggling in their relationship, and questioning where they were in their own lives and work-based identity made for an unstable structure in which things slowly fell apart between them (Chapters Three and Five).

This observation brings me to a tentative conclusion about negotiating everyday uncertainty: without having a supportive, elastic structure in which one can confront uncertainty, subjective and collective senses of wellbeing are easily destabilised. Sometimes a situation challenges us so much that one or more of these legs falls away: depression can disintegrate the strength of the self; divorce can challenge the cohesion of social relationships; losing a job or a home can destabilise our material environment. In the perfect storm, all three facets can crumble together, making everyday life precarious. These were the types of stories I heard when I worked with the homelessness advocacy group: *I lost my job, my house burned down, I suffered from depression, my family wasn't speaking to me.* A question that emerges from this is: left without a structure, what does it take to rebuild?

This is one of the questions the resilience literature considers: are there innate personality traits? Does it take a certain type of help from the government? Joyce's narrative (Chapter Four) suggests it takes building a strong relationship with the self first, and then with intimate others, and then with space. Adam, in different words agrees, recognising the

importance of higher purpose over communication, followed again by space. Others may tell it differently.

My own inclination is that social relationships are primary. Social relationship are embedded in American individualist society at every twist and turn. As much as my participants wanted to think they made decisions for themselves, I witnessed them again and again making decisions to support, care, and connect with other people. While they spoke of these connections in terms of the self, the self remained, for the most part, surprisingly neglected. This echoes other observations that American psychological language disguises actual awareness of the value of human connection (Ortner 2003; Bellah et al. 1985).

The environment, I argue, is secondary. I found it remarkable how little emphasis people put on their environment (in relation to their selves or families) compared to how much I observed it to affect them. In part, this may be in part a privilege-blindness of the middle class. Because their environments were, for the most part, secure, clean, safe, and healthy, they were easily taken for granted. It may also be in part due to the transitory nature of some households, who might not feel they wanted to invest in a more permanent home or neighbourhood. Yet, as Chapter Six highlights, many were deeply embedded in living 'locally.'

The self comes last, because the self is ultimately bound in social and environmental structures; yet, a self that feels detached from these structures or unsupported by these structures is unstable. Despite academic criticism of the over-reflexivity of post-modernity, my participants suggest that therapy has been helpful for them, and that self-reflexivity is a vital glue in appropriate sociality in this context. One should take care of the self first, because this actually shows care for others.

I conclude that the effective negotiation of uncertainty is situated within these three

legs of everyday life: the individual, the social or relational, and the material environment. These experiences are attended to throughout the thesis irregularly because they are, in their nature, inconsistent and intertwined. The material environment, for instance, is not solely material, but is embedded within social relations and subjective experience. Social science scholarship on America has at times overly attended to each of these components in turn, particularly in relations to the extremes of American individualism, the fracturing of communities or disenfranchised groups, and political, financial, or ecological environments. In the everyday of the home, however, these legs are intimately interlaced, and attention needs to be paid to all three. I also conclude that the effective negotiation of uncertainty—maximum creativity and minimum anxiety—requires a bounded frame within which life can be explored. Positive experiences of luck and surprise must be balanced with minimal experiences of risk, anxiety, or fear.

A tension emerges here regarding the usefulness of creative adaptability for the precarious, neoliberal workforce. While my findings focus on the home, they could be scaled to organisational management, a field interested in creative responses to uncertainty (Wilf 2015; Gregg 2009). Despite the sometimes-porous boundaries between home and work (Nippert-Eng 2010), the difference between the household and the workplace remains distinct. The home is no longer a unit of production in the US, although marriage and collective household living certainly have an economic role, particularly regarding consumption. I regard the home as an intimate space of care, cultivation, nourishment and consumption (recognising, of course, that the home space can also be dangerous and 'unhomely' for some). The work place, in comparison, is a unit of economic production and is generally not a space of intimate care for the other.[43] However, in this context, where work

[43] Care work forms something of a middle ground.

identity is a strong facet of participants' lives, the workplace increasingly becomes a space of cultivation and nourishment. In the home, creative responses to uncertainty generally must support systems of intimate care before the self, unless people live alone, and even then decisions are made around absent friends and family. This distinction must remain clear as I argue for the benefits of creativity in the household. The means to the end are not economic.

So how can households creatively negotiate the ubiquity of uncertainty to foster wellbeing? From an individual-perspective, I would argue that the individual can become attuned to the causes of subjective anxiety, mitigate them through everyday actions with others, and embrace the positive aspects of the unknown. In being critical of the notion that the self is responsible for managing the future, I would argue that the structures that surround us—government, jobs, architecture, cities—must provide the basic securities needed to mitigate anxiety as much as possible: healthcare, realistic wages, decent housing. Without basic material security, societies may improvise, learning ways to survive, but they will not necessarily become innovative.[44] The future becomes more difficult to imagine when the possibility of collapse is at the door.

I have said above how inspiring my participants were in their pursuits of wellbeing. I recognise the need for greater clarity in our distinction between individuals and individualism. While we all partake in power, we are also not victimless. People ultimately do what they can do within the structures they find themselves in. Their capabilities at surviving the worst can be honoured, such as resilience or adaptability, but it is also possible to be critical of why they were put in those positions in the first place and why they may not have

[44] Ingold and Hallam (2007) highlight improvisation as always happening and 'innovation' as occurring in retrospect. Of course, as Appadurai (2013) highlights, the 'capacity to aspire' and to make the future is limited by economic disadvantage. Innovation, it seems, is also related to material security.

been able to develop such traits. In criticising the concept of 'potential' as having a glass ceiling, it is easy to forget that there actually is potential for remaking collective futures. Here, people can learn from the everyday lives of others.

THE MAKING OF NEW AMERICAN FUTURES

THE US IS CAUGHT in an impossible loop between the desire for reinvention and the refusal to see beyond individual action. Control over the future is instead broken down into bits: first the States, who can challenge the laws of the federal government, to an extent; then cities, which can act as both complicit spaces and conscious rejection (e.g. 'sanctuary cities'); then towns, neighbourhoods, communities. The final frontier, however, before the mythological individual is said to have control, is the household. With the fracturing of the US throughout time—its building and rebuilding as a country that is not a melting pot, but rather disparate parts—the household has become central in the making of new America. Identities, morality, logic, and action are built behind closed doors, shared with other households, contested and remade endlessly, in the everyday.

America emerges as an mélange of parts that can be remade locally. For my participants, it can also be remade as part of a global economy—and not a global economy of multi-national corporations and global commodities, but a socially responsive global economy that is locally attuned and produced. They see the problematic America as a part of *that other* globalisation, the multi-national, corporate, destructive globalisation. They consider Providence as part of *the real* global, the one that welcomes travellers and diversity, supports local people, and promotes interconnected communities, and in making 'sanctuary cities' within *the real global*, they can remake *the real* America. While this echoes a primarily liberal

sentiment in the US, the remaking of America resonated with much of the country during the 2016 presidential election, as evidenced by the popularity of the slogan 'Make America Great Again.' There's something in this historical moment that fosters the desire for small-scale reinvention.

The great myth of America is that these pockets of place and identity have nothing in common: that the rural red town cannot relate to the liberal urban enclave, that white and black will never understand one another, that men and women are inherently different. Our sameness is invisibilised. In academia in the past decades, the desire for sameness was critiqued as essentialisation. For instance, gender scholars critiqued the whiteness of the 1970s feminist movement, seeking multiculturalism and complex readings of identity and difference. While this work importantly shed light on the inner workings of race and class—and the embodied, tacit forms through which power in enacted—the fracturing mirrored the ascendency of neoliberalism, which I would argue is not only powerful in its suggestion that it emerges from nature itself, but is powerful in the fact that it separates and silos the formation of collective knowledge, which limits our imagining of alternative futures. Critique blinded us to the everyday, just as the everyday blinded us to the future, which in turn forgets our past.

As this thesis illustrates, everyday life is often uncertain. Everyday practice can tell us a lot about the future, particularly when we attend to what aspects of the everyday are upheld when things fall apart. Regardless of changes in the economy or politics, love will still matter to the majority of the American people. The intimate care of the other will be sustained, if not by individuals, as a wider whole. Everyday uncertainty offers one potential framework for considering shared realities. Differences emerge in how everyday uncertainty is experienced, what tools emerge to negotiate it, and how others around us respond. Many

questions emerge for me: if I went into a rural, mostly Republican community in the middle US, would I find similar responses to the same struggles? Would people still mitigate insecurity through social bonds and household objects? Would they tell stories about their adaptive personas and create meaning in their marriages? Would they create homes that helped them attend to the intangible nature of God and love? Everyday uncertainty also offers another insight: it is necessary for creative innovation. Fiction is powerful in America at the moment because it offers precisely what certainty does not: the ability to create the world anew.

Appendix 1: Basic Household Demographics and Layers of Participation

***Indicates that a 'significant' amount of time was spent in these homes, from co-habiting to regular visits (2x week to 2x per month) to homestays (usually in combination with regular visits)*
** Indicates that more than two interviews were conducted, with additional informal but infrequent visits*
[Ψ] Indicates homestay
[Φ] Indicates only 2 interviews

Household Type	Age Range	Gender	Occupation	Ethnic/Cultural Backgrounds
single (never married)*	34	M	Artist/Small Business Entrepreneur	American, 2nd generation (parents South American Jewish)
single (never married)**	37	F	Legal Assistant	Puerto Rican, American, 2nd generation (parents Puerto Rican)
single (divorced) [Φ]	45	M	University IT	White, American
single (widow, adult children)[Ψ]**	64	F	University Administration	White, American
couple (childless) **	31; 45	F; M	Social Services; Mental Health (Independent Contractor)	White, American
couple (childless) **	34; 37	F; M	University Administration; Accounting	White, American
couple (childless) **[Ψ]	32; 30	F; M	University Admin; Finance	White, American; White, European
couple (childless) [Φ]	34; 34	F; M	Freelance Musicians; Adjunct Faculty	White, American
couple (childless) [Φ]	49; 57	M; M	Mental Health; Real Estate	White, American, Jewish background; White, American, Portuguese background
couple (adult children in college) [Φ]	50-55; 50-55*; 3 children, 21-27*	F; M	University Faculty; Small Business Entrepreneur	Native-American; White, American
family (parents and young child)**	44; 46; child, 2	F; M	Wellness; Mental Health (Independent Contractors)	White, American, Jewish background; White, American
family (parents and young	36; 36;	F; M	Small Business	White, American

child)*	child, 1		Entrepreneurs	
family (parents and young children) $^{\Phi}$	38; 35-40; 2 children, 2 and infant	F; M	Social Services; Stay-at-Home Father	White, Italian-American, 3rd generation; White, American
family (single mother and young children)** $^{\Psi}$	38; 3 children 4-10	F	Administration	Indian-American, 2nd generation (parents Indian)
family (multigenerational, young children) $^{\Phi}$	40; 45; 60+; 4 children, 2-12	F; M; F;	Social Services; Small Business Entrepreneur	African-American, 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation (from Ghana)*
family (multi-generational, adult children)*	23; 56; 58; 60; 84; 86	F; F; F; F; F; M	Administration; Social Services	White, Italian-American, 3rd-5th generation
shared housing** $^{\Psi}$	34; 29	F; M	University Administration and Artist (repeat); Food Service	White, American
shared housing** $^{\Psi}$	27; 29	F; F	t; Artist	White, American

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

ABOUT

Through interviews, photography, and video, this study explores everyday living and material culture in a selection of ordinary households from a variety of different backgrounds. The information collected will relate back to questions of health and wellbeing in America. The research is being conducted by Tess Bird, a doctoral student in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oxford in the UK, under the supervision of Professor Stanley Ulijaszek and Dr. Inge Daniels at the University of Oxford. The study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is entirely optional and participants are free to decline participation in any part of the study or to withdraw from the study at any time. All information will be anonymized, with names and addresses kept confidential. There will be no direct compensation for participation.

What will participation involve?

Participation will initially involve a brief preliminary interview after which you will be asked to give me a tour of your primary living spaces and describe your everyday life. I will ask if I can take photographs or video-record the tour, and if I can audio-record our conversation. Digital recordings are optional/confidential and for research purposes only, unless otherwise indicated. Follow-up interviews will vary, but may include participatory photo exercises (where you take photos following a set of prompts) and less-structured interviews (for instance, if you are very busy, I can help you prepare dinner or run errands while you answer follow-up questions). The goal is to see what everyday life is like in your home.

What are the possible benefits and disadvantages of taking part?

Participation is a chance to share your individual insights and is expected to be an overall enjoyable experience. Disadvantages are limited, but there is the possibility that interviews may at times feel "too personal." However, care will be taken to avoid private spaces and topics that may be too sensitive, and you will at no point be obliged to talk about any topic that makes you uncomfortable.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All data will be anonymized, with pseudonyms used to refer to participants in published materials. This anonymized published material may include descriptions of daily life, the inside of the home, perceptions of health, body image, family histories, identity, and other details. Participants are reminded that their anonymity can be unintentionally compromised. However, every effort will be made to keep information private. You are encouraged to ask questions regarding the data being collected if you have concerns.

FUTURE USE OF DATA

The data collected throughout the research will include digital recordings, photographs, video, and researcher notes. Data will be analyzed for the writing of a doctoral thesis. A digital online copy of the thesis will be deposited with the Oxford University Research Archive (ORA) and will be published with open access, meaning that it will be available to all internet users. Additionally, academic publications, conference presentations, book chapters, and an academic book may emerge from research, some of which may be accessible online.

What should I do if I have any concerns or complaints?

Questions regarding the project should first be addressed to Tess Bird via email (pvdhomeproject@gmail.com) or in person. In the event of unanswered concerns, the Chair of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography Departmental Research Ethics Committee (SAME DREC), Professor Marcus Banks, can be reached at marcus.banks@anthro.ox.ac.uk, 51-53 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE.

Appendix 3: Semi-formal Interview Questions

INTERVIEW 1.1: PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW

Consent: *(Recorded) I want to confirm before we begin that you've had a chance to read the PIS and provide your oral consent for me to collect information about your daily life in and around the home.*

Demographic Details

1. How do you self-identify?
    a. Date of Birth/Age
    b. Gender
    c. Ethnic or cultural background(s)
    d. Sexual preference
    e. Relationship Status
2. What do you do for work currently?
    a. Besides your current position(s), where else or what else have you done for work?
3. How would you describe your economic situation?
4. Anything else you want to share based on the questions I've asked so far?

Household History

1. How long have you lived at this residence?
    a. Rental / Owned / Other
2. Where did you live previously?
    a. Why did you move?
3. How long have you lived in Providence?
4. Who else is in your household and how are they related to you?

Family Background:

1. Your own upbringing
    a. Where were you born?
    b. Where did you grow up?
    c. How would you describe your family life as a child?
2. Do you have any children? Or tell me about your children.
    a. How many?
    b. Where were they born?
    c. Where did they grow up (if applicable)?
3. Did anyone in your immediate or extended family come from another country? If so, where? When did they arrive? How would you describe your family ancestry?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

INTERVIEW 1.2: HOUSEHOLD TOUR

Open-Ended Tour (with improvised questions)

1. Can you describe your daily routine starting with getting out of bed in the morning until you go to sleep? (15-45 minutes)

Follow-up Questions

2. Do you have any favorite spaces in the home?
3. Where do you think you spend the most time? Why is that?
4. What are your favorite things to do in your free time? Do you feel like you spend enough time doing these activities? What types of things prevent you from doing them?
5. If you had to leave your house quickly and could only take three items with you, what you would they be?
6. How often do you/do you like to:
    a. Spend time in the house (vs. outside of the home)
    b. Watch TV (and by what means)
    c. Surf the internet/spend time online? What do you do?
    d. Cook
    e. Snack
    f. Exercise
    g. Read (and by what means)
    h. Socialize or spend time with other household members
    i. Engage in other activities in the home that I have not mentioned, such as crafts.
    j. Is there anything else you think you should mention?

Outside of the Home

1. How do you get around the city? Do you own a car? Do you bike? Take the bus?
2. Where is your work place? How do you get there?
3. Where do you do your shopping?
4. Do you socialize much? If so, where? With who?
5. Do you like your neighbourhood? What do you like to do in your neighbourhood?
6. What do you think of Providence? What do you like to do in the city?

INTERVIEW 2: HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Interview 1 Follow-up

1. Can you think of any changes since our last interview that you felt significantly interrupted your daily routine?
2. Is there anything from our last interview that you have thought about in the past months? For instance, questions you wished you'd answered differently or things you changed as a result of being interviewed?
3. *Questions for in-depth participants only:*
    a. You've been through quite a few things this year, including x, x, and x, do you have any thoughts on how these things have affected your life?

b. Do you have things that you do to help you cope with stress?
c. Do you think you dealt with them well? Do you wish you did anything differently?

Health and Wellbeing

1. What objects, spaces, or experiences in your everyday life do you think are:
    a. most important to your sense of wellbeing?
    b. in the way of your sense of wellbeing?
2. What are some objects, spaces, or experiences that you consider:
    a. healthy?
    b. unhealthy?
3. What do you feel is in a state of tension, opposition, or contrast in your home?
4. What do you associate with Americanness, or what does being an American mean for you?

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