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## Perimeters and Pods: Crisis, Collective Action, and Small Towns

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Perimeters and Pods: Crisis, Collective Action, and Small Towns

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Ruth Kohl

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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This project is dedicated to the small villages and towns that line the American East Coast.  
Thank you for always providing me with a home.



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## Introduction

My idea for this project began a bit differently than what it has transformed into. I began thinking about what I wanted this thesis to be a little over a year ago, just before the start of the pandemic. Originally, I had planned to travel to Rockport and Gloucester (both in Massachusetts) to conduct my fieldwork, and had envisioned a thesis discussing town identity and the challenges that revitalization projects—such as the ones that are happening now in Gloucester—pose to these small communities’ sense of character. As time went on, however, and COVID rapidly progressed, it soon became clear that this was not possible. After a few mostly unsuccessful cold-calls to residents of Gloucester, I decided it would be best to shift my focus slightly and turn to Tivoli, where I am writing this now.

For the past year, I have been possessed by the idea of small towns, and the question of what it means to exist in one. My attention was immediately drawn to the aforementioned towns of Rockport and Gloucester because I had a personal connection to them; my parents had lived in Gloucester for a number of years in the 1990s, and, still homesick, took me to visit nearly twice a year. My mother had been enrolled in graduate school in Boston, and my father had worked for the Massachusetts Watershed Association. It became a kind of yearly pilgrimage for us to drive by their old house—the house in which their toilet seat cracked in half one winter because they couldn’t afford heat—which lay on the long, winding road between Rockport and Gloucester. The two towns remain some of my parents’ favorite places to visit, and many of my earliest memories involve darting in and out of the tourist shops that line Rockport’s streets, wading into the cold ocean water, and browsing through the gently-used books that lined the walls of a great second-hand bookstore.

Needless to say, I felt an immense affinity for Rockport and Gloucester, and saw the potential budding of a senior project that concerned them. What I did not account for, of course, was the exponential growth of COVID, which eradicated my hopes of visiting them and being able to do my fieldwork in person. This was not exactly something that I easily accepted; it took me a very long time to decide that I could and wanted to write about Tivoli. But, after some time, I came to realize that the passion I had for Gloucester and Rockport was here in Tivoli as well. I have spent two years living here and four years visiting the friends and coffee shops that lie within its boundaries, and now I've come to recognize it as my home.

One of the things that drew me to the exploration of Rockport and Gloucester was my interest in small towns and group identities, how both of those things can be challenged by other forces, and how the people in these communities reconcile those difficulties.

In this thesis, I focus on the ways in which people who live in small and already established social communities form smaller, tighter social groups when they experience crises. At the heart of this project is the way people in small communities construct more narrow social identities and participate in collective action within moments of crisis and conflict.

### Methodology

In my historical chapter, I researched the history of Rockport, and decided to focus on two pivotal moments in the town's history. I read primary and secondary sources to gather information about the events, mostly relying on newspaper articles. With these sources in mind, I investigated and analyzed the various social mechanisms at play within them.

With regard to my in-person fieldwork, I conducted it here in Tivoli, New York. There were many people here for me to talk to, and all of my field notes and interviews concern my friends and classmates—all Bard students who live in Tivoli. I texted or called these friends to see if they would be willing to talk to me, and as for my field notes, I asked permission to jot some notes down in my book during chance encounters on the streets of Tivoli. I have given them all pseudonyms, except for those who did not want them.

I explained to my interlocutors the scope of my project and the reasons behind it. I met up with many of my interlocutors for interviews in or outside of their homes in Tivoli, and I met one of them on campus.

I split my fieldwork into two thematic sections: one on socializing in COVID, and one on romantic relationships during the pandemic. I mostly employed participant-observation in the portion on socializing; I jotted down notes and conducted one interview. Using participant-observation for the second piece, however, proved to be difficult, as I both did not want to intrude on my friends' romantic relationships, and could think of very few people who would allow it to begin with. For this section, I instead relied on both my own experiences with being in a relationship during COVID as well as interviews with friends who were in relationships in the pandemic: two who began new relationships after COVID had started, and one, my own partner, who was in a relationship when COVID began.

Within the interviews that concerned socializing during the pandemic, I was mostly curious about my interlocutors' analysis, feelings, and their own behaviors surrounding COVID. I asked questions like, "What is your general attitude towards COVID safety precautions, and do you think it's changed in the past year?" and "How did you and your friends decide to form a pod?" I

focused on peoples' personal experiences with the pandemic and how they responded to it generally, as well as the shifts that occurred during it.

In my interviews about romantic relationships, I wanted to know the stories of my interlocutors' relationships: how they began and how they operated during the pandemic. I also wanted to know their speculations on their romances during COVID, such as how they thought the pandemic had changed their relationships. For the two of my friends who had begun their relationships during COVID, this was more of a hypothetical question, while my partner had more concrete answers. In regard to my reflections on my own relationship during the pandemic, I used methods often utilized in autoethnography, namely meticulous reflexivity.

### Chapter Overview

My first chapter focuses on two events in Rockport's history: a strike carried out by the laborers of the town's granite quarry, and a temperance movement spearheaded by the wives of Rockport's fishermen, who raided the town's liquor supply with hatchets. I examine these two events as distinct moments in time, distinctly separate from one another and yet with some significant theoretical connections between them. I describe the ways in which these incidents began, and lay out the scene for each of them. I analyze the mechanisms of "social closure" (see "Defining Social Closures") within these events, working to understand the ways in which both groups use this method to achieve their goals.

In my second chapter, I turn to contemporary Tivoli, where I fix my attention to the ways that social groupings and friendships take shape during COVID. I describe many moments of either

unexpectedly or deliberately seeing my friends in Tivoli, and think deeply about what these moments mean and say about friendships during a crisis in which we are not supposed to socialize. I define the common theme within these moments as reluctant social closures, necessitated by circumstances outside of our control.

Finally, my third chapter examines the ways romantic relationships function, change, and progress during COVID, specifically with regard to socializing. I rely on three interviews with friends that are in relationships, questioning them about how they spend their time with their partners and how they feel about romantic love during a pandemic. All three of my interlocutors mentioned how interesting or strange the inability to go to large social gatherings with one's partner is, and I consider the ways in which this lack of opportunity affects their perceptions of and the operations of relationships.

### Defining Social Closures

In this project, I use the borrowed term “social closure” to describe the social processes that I analyze both in my historical chapter and in my field notes. Throughout my writing, I use the concept as both a verb to characterize social mechanisms, but also as a noun (“closure”), as a synonym for the concept of quarantine “pods,” in order to illustrate the complexities wrapped up in this idea. The term social closure was first coined by sociologist Max Weber, though in my work, I understand it through sociologists Frank Parkin's and Juergen Mackert's interpretations.

In his essay “Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique,” sociologist Frank Parkin describes and analyzes Max Weber's theory. Parkin writes: “By social closure Weber means the

process by which social collectives seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles. This entails the singling out of certain social or physical attributes as the justificatory basis of exclusion.”<sup>1</sup>

To pull back a bit from this emphasis on exclusion as the primary operation of social closure, sociologist Juergen Mackert provides a more general overview of Weber’s theory, writing:

Basically, closure refers to processes of drawing boundaries, constructing identities, and building communities in order to monopolize scarce resources for one’s own group...the process of closure of social relations—of groups, organizations, institutions, and even national societies—is the fundamental process of both “communal” (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and “associative” relationships (*Vergesellschaftung*), and neither would be possible without social closure.<sup>2</sup>

Though social closure heavily involves exclusionary practices, it is also a constructive mechanism. Small towns make use of geography as a way to build social closures; residents live and often work close to each other within a set, topographical boundary. Frequently, inhabitants of these towns embrace the close-knit community and sense of camaraderie that small towns’ social closure provides. This form of social closure focuses less on the exclusion of those outside of the town—or at least engages in a more passive form of exclusion—and instead more on the inclusion of those within the town, exemplified by the small town closure’s sole reliance on geography, and not identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Parkin, “Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique,” in *Social Stratification: Class, Race, and Gender in Sociological Perspective*, ed. David B. Grusky. (Boulder: Westview, 1979 [1994]), 143-144.

<sup>2</sup> Juergen Mackert, “Social Closure,” Oxford Bibliographies in Sociology, 2012. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0084.xml>.

Within my writing, I argue that with the emergence of crisis and conflict, social closures in small towns are forced to become even smaller, and must begin the deliberate process of exclusion based on identity and belief.

#### A Note on Small Towns, Tourism, and the Exclusion within them

Worth mentioning here is the significance that American small towns and their histories with rural tourism have within this project, as well as the systems of exclusion that were borne out of both of them. The American small town is the subject of much theorizing, particularly within the social sciences. Small towns and villages in this country call back images of nineteenth century farming life and the idealized motif of helping one's neighbor. Though throughout the past century millions of people have abandoned small-town life in favor of urban metropolises, still millions have stayed. The American small town holds an invaluable piece of America's history, and is mythologized into idealism even today. The rural United States has long been thought of as a bastion of hope for the continuation of what many Americans perceive as the country's values: compassion, hard work, and egalitarianism.

Small communities in the United States are older than the country itself. Most notably in New England, settlers established modest villages, usually containing a few homes, a church, and a town meeting house. Residents of these communities often relied on farming for both work and sustenance, and many rarely ventured far outside of the town limits. Because of the size of these villages, people knew everyone that lived there; these towns constituted residents' entire social worlds: their extended families, their coworkers, their friends, their enemies.

It is somewhat remarkable that this model of living has continued—more or less undisturbed— throughout the following four centuries, its foundation only slightly altered to make room for social and economic changes. The American Revolution depended on small villages to support its cause, relying on location-based militias of at most a few hundred men, many of whom directly contributed to vital military victories over Britain.<sup>3</sup> In the 1800s, as the country expanded westward, so too did people coming from the East Coast. Pioneers set off in wagon trains to establish more of these settlements throughout the Midwest. In the twentieth century, small towns remained an important part of America’s identity, throughout the hardships of the Great Depression and the call for raising “moral,” upstanding families in the 1950s.

It is vital to recognize that the history of small towns and villages within the United States is hugely marked by instances of oppression and brutality. Early pioneers began the process of settling westward by the forced removal of Native Americans, eventually leading to the “Indian Removal Act” of 1830, which sanctioned the federal government’s seizure of Native American lands east of the state of Mississippi.<sup>4</sup> Seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century small towns relied heavily on the labor of enslaved people to maintain farmlands, who generally experienced more atrocious living and working conditions than those who lived in urban areas.<sup>5</sup> As time progressed, the small town remained a place of exclusion. Despite their powerful ties to immigrants—many of whom established small settlements across the country—throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, many immigrants were treated with mistrust and suspicion in

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<sup>3</sup> John Ferling, “Myths of the American Revolution,” Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, January 1, 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/myths-of-the-american-revolution-10941835/>.

<sup>4</sup> “Forced Removal of Native Americans,” Equal Justice Initiative, July 1, 2016, <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-forced-removal-native-americans/#:~:text=In%201830%2C%20President%20Andrew%20Jackson,in%20what%20is%20now%20Oklahoma.>

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Boston, “Living Conditions,” in “Slavery and the Making of America,” Thirteen, PBS, 2004, [https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/p\\_history.html](https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/experience/living/p_history.html).

these communities. One of the advantages many Americans saw in the small town was its insular nature: neighbors knew each other, people worked together. But this seclusion can easily extend itself to a rejection of outsiders, which pervaded in many of these communities.

Wrapped up in this idea of inclusion and exclusion, as well as a crucial aspect to consider when writing and researching about small towns—Tivoli, Rockport, and Gloucester in particular—is the role that tourism plays in these communities. All three of these towns have significant historical ties to tourism, and tourism in its modern form has only continued to expand within them.

In his dissertation “The Birth of American Tourism: New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790-1835,” Richard H. Gassan describes the origins of tourism in the country, asserting that tourism as we know it today began here, in New York’s Hudson Valley, predominantly because of its proximity to New York City and its wealthy residents. The area’s majestic mountains and bodies of water enticed many affluent city dwellers to build estates here during the 18th and 19th centuries. This migration piqued the interest of other city residents, and combined with the growing rise in wages, establishment of the five day working week, and increased access to transportation, more and more people soon found it possible to afford vacations to places they had never before visited. By the 1830s, Gassan argues that the foundation for tourism throughout the country was laid down.<sup>6</sup>

The Hudson Valley wasn’t the only place that tourists flocked to. Much of New England was considered an alluring destination as well, beginning with the early nineteenth century

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<sup>6</sup> Richard H. Gassan. “The Birth of American Tourism: New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790-1835.” (2008).

conception of sea voyages for one's health.<sup>7</sup> Much like the Hudson Valley, New England's natural features drew people from all over the country who were looking for an escape from the hustle and bustle of city life. After the establishment of these sea voyages, other forms of ocean-based tourism began to take rise, and resorts for the wealthy started to pop up along New England's coast.<sup>8</sup>

Many of the appeals of tourism in New England still ring true today. In her book "Inventing New England," historian Dona Brown describes how New England was "sentimentalized." Brown discusses how wealthy, white tourists mythologized New England as a "rural, preindustrial, and ethnically 'pure'" place to take refuge from what they found offensive about the city.<sup>9</sup>

Brown continues to discuss the urge wealthy Americans had to move away from minority groups, and how this idea of an entirely rural and white New England was fabricated and sought out by tourists:

Much of New England by the last quarter of the century was in fact highly urbanized, industrial, and ethnically diverse. Its city landscapes were dominated by huge brick factories where immigrants from every part of Europe sought work. But tourists sought out the isolated or remote parts of New England, looking for an imagined world of pastoral beauty, rural independence, virtuous simplicity, and religious and ethnic homogeneity.<sup>10</sup>

Like Brown, T.D. Seymour Bassett discusses the implications that the rise in access to vacationing led to in his article "Documenting Recreation and Tourism in New England." Bassett

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<sup>7</sup> T. D. Seymour Bassett. "Documenting Recreation and Tourism in New England." *The American Archivist* 50, no. 4 (1987): 550-69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40293165>.

<sup>8</sup> Bassett, "Documenting Recreation," 551.

<sup>9</sup> Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, "Inventing," 9.

writes: “In the late nineteenth century, as wages began to rise above subsistence, the working classes for the first time could afford to escape from the hot city in summer...Resorts then raised three kinds of barriers against them and other ‘undesirables’: outright exclusion, monopoly of the resource, and inflated prices.”<sup>11</sup> Bassett goes on to describe how resorts in the 1950s used the word “exclusive” in order to signify that Jews and Black people were not welcome there. This process of inclusion and exclusion in resorts functioned in a similar way to the exclusiveness of small towns in America: deliberately and pointedly.

Though small towns have seen challenges to their continued existence in the last fifty years as people set off for big cities, their place within the country has proved essential. In his book *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*, sociologist Robert Wuthnow gives some insight into the reasons people remain in small communities, writing:

The standard answer to these questions is that people live in small towns because they value community and cherish the support it provides. They might well have chosen to live elsewhere — indeed, many of them have — but they prefer living in a small town because the community gives them a sense of belonging. They know everyone. They see their neighbors at backyard barbeques, school functions, and church. The community is familiar, and a place they know and cherish as their home. Its inhabitants share similar values and lifestyles — ones that probably were more common in the past than they are today.<sup>12</sup>

But how does all of this hold up when these spaces go through conflicts? What happens when community members are not on the same page, and their long-professed shared values have seen fractures? In Rockport and Tivoli, this is a significant question.

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<sup>11</sup> Bassett, “Documenting Recreation and Tourism,” 552.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Wuthnow. "Introduction." In *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*, (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

## Chapter 1

The town of Rockport, Massachusetts is today a thriving, artistically-oriented community and internationally recognized tourist destination. It is located on Cape Ann, a small headland found about thirty miles northeast of Boston. Rockport's small downtown is clustered with art galleries, tourist shops, and restaurants, and the town also boasts two residential art colonies. The village is home to "Motif Number One," a small red fishing shack that Rockport's residents claim is the most-painted building in America. Though Rockport is now best known for its ample connections to the art and music worlds, the town's past is storied and quite interesting.

Two events in the history of Rockport stand out as unique: a labor strike that was launched by the town's granite quarry workers, and a group of fishermen's wives who, led by prohibitionist Hannah Jumper, carried out a raid on Rockport's liquor supply. Though these movements are undoubtedly distinct from one another and are deserving of their own separate contextualizations, their theoretical affiliations are also fascinating to explore.

In this chapter, I focus on how the people involved in these two historical moments of conflict form tighter social closures, and what this tightening has to tell us about conflict and crisis in small communities. Both the workers of the quarry strike and the women of the temperance movement had to establish deliberate social groupings in order to carry out their campaigns, but these processes of closure were not especially clear-cut. Rather, the construction of these factions was complex and multifaceted.

The women who drove the raid on the town's liquor used a complicated type of social closure against their husbands, family members, and neighbors, adopting this closure as a temporary tactic with the goal of forming a better, stronger, more integrated community of

Rockport, as a whole. The striking laborers of Rockport's quarry utilized two sorts of social closures: one against the people in charge of the granite company, and the other against the stand-in laborers that the company brought in to replace them.

The ways in which social closures were employed within these two groups are intricate and based on ideological motivations, and though they involve social identities, their foundations lie in principles and beliefs.

### Temperance and Turmoil in Rockport

Several newspaper articles and blog posts tell the story of Hannah Jumper, a 75-year-old seamstress, native of Rockport, and temperance advocate who led a raid on Rockport's liquor stores and restaurants on July 8th, 1856. In her article "How hatchet-wielding women ended alcohol sales in Rockport for 163 years" for Boston.com, and in his article "'Hatchet Hannah' leads raid on Rockport liquor establishments, July 8, 1856," Arianna MacNeill and Gordon Harris, respectively, tell the tale of Hannah Jumper's sweep on Rockport's alcohol supply. An article for Mass Moments, titled "Rockport Women Smash Liquor Barrels," and a post headed "Hatchet Hannah and the Demon Rum" on the blog North of Boston, also help to weave the account together.

During this time, many women in Rockport—particularly fishermen's wives—had become increasingly upset by their husbands' inability to provide for their families because of their inordinate spending on alcohol, the Mass Moments piece describes. Frustrated, and with nowhere else to turn, the women began to plot their own course of action.

Harris recounts that while the women met in secret, the town was preparing for its Fourth

of July celebrations. Unofficial celebrations began on the night of the third, and the drunken uproar carried on for nearly a week. When the women of Rockport tried to report the mayhem to the town's police in an attempt to end it, the sheriffs were of no use, and only made excuses for the men's behavior. The women of Rockport were incensed, and the embarrassment of the event as well as the town's refusal to punish anyone involved served to propel their movement forward. On July seventh, they made their plans.

According to MacNeill, it was decided that they would mark the establishments they believed harbored liquor with white x's ahead of time. They agreed to arm themselves with hatchets and hammers, and one woman even volunteered to make a pennant, which read "The Ladies Temperance Banner" and was complete with a small hatchet underneath the text. At nine o'clock in the morning, the group of women headed to the center of town, concealing their axes under large shawls. Along the way, they picked up more people to join their cause, and the group grew to nearly two hundred people. They surged to the restaurants, stores, and private residences they had marked off the night before. The women grabbed barrels and bottles of liquor and hurled them into the street or chopped at them with their weapons. Soon, almost the entire town had gathered, either to simply watch or to try to intervene. The group of teetotalers forced their way into locked establishments and homes, destroying nearly \$700 worth of alcohol.<sup>13</sup> An article in the *Boston Traveller*, written the same day, described some of the opposition they met: "At several places they were met with the most determined resistance. One man stood in front of his building, and with a large club in his hand, threatened deadly violence to any who should enter;

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<sup>13</sup> Arianna MacNeill, "How hatchet-wielding women ended alcohol sales in Rockport for 163 years," Boston.com, January 28, 2019, <https://www.boston.com/news/history/2019/01/28/hannah-jumper-hatchet-gang-rockport-alcohol>.

but not withstanding his threat, several of the more expert ones entered the back way and succeeded in rolling out five barrels of rum, brandy and gin.”<sup>14</sup>

By the end of it, MacNeill tells us, the women had raided thirteen places of business, had spent five hours hacking and spilling the town’s liquor supply, and nearly one thousand Rockport residents had gathered in the center of town to watch the disturbance. Some reported that the smell of rum wafted all the way across the bay.<sup>15 16 17</sup>

Despite the chaos of the day, the aftermath was not as bad as what could be anticipated. Some of the men were angry with their wives, but others praised them for their bravery and action. As stated in the blog post for North of Boston, one shop owner, Jim Brown, who ran the local grocery store, was livid. Brown took his case to court, claiming that the women should have to pay for their breaking and entering and wreckage to his store. Essex County court, however, ruled in favor of Hannah Jumper and the rest of the women. Brown appealed the case many times, and each time he was dismissed. Eventually, the court ruled that Brown had to pay the women’s court fees, for a total of nearly \$350, and public opinion remained on the side of the women.<sup>18</sup>

Hannah Jumper’s efforts had a tremendously long-lasting effect on Rockport, and the town remained dry until 2005, when residents voted to allow restaurants and inns to serve

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<sup>14</sup> “The Liquor Law of the Women of Rockport,” *Boston Traveller*, in the *New York Daily Times*, July 16, 1856, 5.

<sup>15</sup> MacNeill, “How hatchet-wielding women.”

<sup>16</sup> Gordon Harris, “‘Hatchet Hannah’ leads raid on Rockport liquor establishments, July 8, 1856,” *Historic Ipswich*, July 6, 2015, <https://historicipswich.org/2015/07/06/hatchet-hannah/>.

<sup>17</sup> “North of Boston Historical Figures – Hatchet Hannah and the Demon Rum,” *North of Boston* (blog), March 6, 2015,

<https://northofboston.org/blog/2015/03/06/north-of-boston-historical-figures-hatchet-hannah-and-the-demon-rum/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Hatchet Hannah and the Demon Rum,” *North of Boston*.

alcohol, provided it was only served alongside a meal. To this day, there are still no liquor stores permitted in Rockport.<sup>19</sup>

### Strikes and Stones

The second campaign first began in 1879, but perhaps the most memorable incident from the movement occurred in early 1899. Rockport's northwestern-most point encompasses Halibut Point State Park, a parcel of land that lies alongside the ocean. Although today the park is filled with tourists and joggers, in the mid to late 1800s, it was instead filled with quarry workers. Halibut Point State Park was once the site of Rockport Granite Company's largest quarry, which supplied stone to Union Station Fountain in Washington, D.C. and paving blocks to New York City. Made up mostly of European immigrants, the quarry was the second-most fruitful type of work in the area, after fishing. Quarry workers generally lived difficult lives; they were made to work extremely long days and were subjected to grueling physical labor. Finally, in the late 1800s, the brutal conditions of work in the quarry pushed its workers to strike.

In her book *Hammers on Stone: A History of Cape Ann Granite*, concerning the historical background of the region's second biggest industry, historian and Gloucester native Barbara Howell Erkkila provides an account of these strikes. Erkkila describes how on March 6, 1899, Finnish quarry workers went on strike, arguing for 9 hour work days and overtime pay. During the strike, Rockport Granite Company brought in about one hundred and fifty Italian laborers

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<sup>19</sup> MacNeill, "How hatchet-wielding women."

from Boston to fill the gap the Finnish workers had left. The Finnish workers attempted to explain to the Italians that they were striking, as they assumed that the company had not informed them of the reason they were brought in. The Italian workers, however, were scared of the situation, and continued laboring in the quarry.

As Erkkila details, on April 20, 1899, fed up with the lack of response from the granite company, a group of two hundred Finnish laborers marched from the village to the quarry, armed with rocks and clubs. During the commotion, the Italian labor force hid in a boiler house near the quarry, closing the shutters and turning off the lights. The group of strikers noticed this, and called out to the Italians, asking for them to join them on their march. No one came out from the building, and the Finnish workers became angry. They began to throw sticks and rocks at the house, and one worker even attempted to tear off the building's shutters before being stopped by a policeman. Suddenly, a gun was fired. It was unclear who had shot the gun, but a Finnish worker later discovered that his shoelaces had been shot clean off.

More police soon arrived, and told the strikers that they would not accomplish anything until they met with supervisors from the granite company. Eventually, the mob disbanded. Meanwhile, the Italian workers had sneaked out of the back of the boiler house and hidden in the woods behind it. Though the granite company beseeched them to stay, insisting that the strikers would not continue to bother them, as few as thirty of them had left for Boston by the next morning, Erkkila recounts.

Soon after the Rockport Quarry Strike, neighboring Pigeon Hill Granite Company workers went on strike as well. Tensions remained high between Cape Ann's granite companies and their workers, and on May 8, 1899, Rockport Granite Company's workers again took to the streets.

Again, it was a group of two hundred Finnish workers armed with clubs. This time, they marched instead to the company wharf, where the company's engineers and blacksmiths (who were not on strike), accompanied by officials from the company, were loading a ship with paving stones. Company executives panicked when they saw the mob with their clubs and stones, and sent out a distress call to Rockport and Gloucester for backup.

Erkkila illustrates how the Finnish strikers yelled and ran to try to panic the horses that were helping the loading. The horses, frightened, started to lunge. Soon, everyone at the scene was brandishing weapons. The workers flung the paving stones and pushed people, moving closer to the company's general manager C. Harry Rogers. As they pushed the manager closer to the edge of the wharf, Rogers reached into his pocket and pulled out a revolver. He aimed at the biggest of the strikers, and the mob immediately froze. At this point, the policemen who had come from Rockport and nearby Gloucester intervened, and were able to persuade the mob to retreat.<sup>20</sup>

It's remarkable that two such powerful and revolutionary events occurred in just one small town, and it begs the question: why? What is it about Rockport or Cape Ann more broadly that enabled these movements to happen? The particularities of Rockport are quite relevant here: Rockport is a very small town—even smaller in the nineteenth century—and it had only two industries during this time: fishing and quarrying.

Rockport's size is an important piece of what allowed these movements to happen and, ultimately, to succeed. Because of the small population of the town, neither the strikers nor the temperance movement needed to advance their movement through either the local government or

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Howell Erkkila, *Hammers on Stone: A History of Cape Ann Granite* (Gloucester: Peter Smith Publisher, 1987), 143-146.

the town media, which could have negatively affected residents' perception of the events. Instead, they pulled people they knew into their demonstrations, or at least tried to, in the case of the quarry strikers. The women of Rockport's temperance movement brought along friends and allies as they marched into the center of town, and were later able to avoid paying fines in damages to an angry shopkeeper because of a judge's sympathy for their situation. People in town joined the women's protest because they knew and trusted the demonstrators; these weren't frightening strangers armed with hatchets, they were instead advocates for a worthy cause that was important to the wellbeing of the town as a whole. No third party could distort their message or spark fear in the hearts of Rockport's residents because they were able to spread their own message directly: to friends, family, and neighbors.

The perception of small towns in the U.S. as "wholesome" and hardworking, a longstanding trope<sup>21</sup> within American society, may have contributed to Rockport's successes. Though some were angry with the movements, such as the granite company executives and the shopkeepers who sold alcohol, many sympathized with them. People across the country read about the demonstrations in their local newspapers, and found common ground with Rockport's residents. They too had experienced the troubles that the quarry workers and the women of the temperance movement fought back against in their own small towns. They understood unfair, dangerous working conditions in their own jobs, and they saw firsthand the way men spent too much money on alcohol instead of providing for their wives and families. These struggles were as real to them as they were to the people of Rockport.

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<sup>21</sup> Fern K. Willits, "The Rural Mystique and Tourism Development: Data from Pennsylvania," *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 24(02), 1993, 159-160.

Rockport is not the sole site of these sorts of movements. Small-scale, women-run temperance movements ran through towns in New York and Ohio,<sup>22</sup> and labor strikes and unions have significant histories in small towns across both the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>23</sup> Many important movements throughout history have started in small towns before spreading to the national level. Perhaps because—at least in part—of the lack of opportunities for work in rural areas as opposed to in big cities, unfair circumstances had a more profound effect on people who lived and worked in small towns. In places like Rockport during this time, there were very few avenues for escape from work. Often, people’s livelihoods became their whole lives, out of necessity, and there were far fewer distractions from labor as there were in cities. And, of course, organizers of small town demonstrations did not have to go through local media or governments.

At the time of Rockport’s temperance movement, simultaneous temperance campaigns were going on throughout the United States, but the movement did not reach the national level until the late nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Early, small temperance movements were started in states along the East Coast during the American Revolution.<sup>25</sup> These demonstrations were closely associated with farmers who wanted to ban the distilling of whiskey. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, New England and New York saw other temperance movements, mostly headed by church congregations, which frequently didn’t gain much traction outside of their parishes. Religion

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<sup>22</sup> “Women and the Temperance Movement,” Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/women-and-the-temperance-movement>.

<sup>23</sup> “A Brief History of Unions,” Union Plus, <https://www.unionplus.org/page/brief-history-unions>.

<sup>24</sup> Alice W. Campbell, “The Temperance Movement,” 2017, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/religious/the-temperance-movement/>

<sup>25</sup> B.S. Katcher, “Benjamin Rush's educational campaign against hard drinking,” *American Journal of Public Health* 83, no.2 (1993): 274-275.

played a large role in the push for abstinence, with many North American Evangelicals and Protestants involved in the missions of both temperance and abolition.<sup>26</sup>

Soon, women became ardent supporters of nation-wide temperance. Abstinence from alcohol was considered a woman's cause because alcohol so directly affected the way husbands treated their wives, and because it was advertised as a religious and moral cause, which were traditionally undertaken by women.<sup>27</sup> Many husbands became violent toward their wives and families under the influence of alcohol. In addition to this, women—who were generally more religious than their husbands during this period—feared for their husbands' futures in the afterlife, believing that they would receive salvation from God if they continued to drink.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it gave women something to do and believe in that was separate from their homes and families. Temperance movements provided women public speaking opportunities and the freedom to think politically, both of which were not common allowances for women in the nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> Hannah Jumper and her raid on Rockport's alcohol epitomizes the stories of many women and wives across the country, women who had had enough with their husbands' poor behavior and excessive spending on alcohol.

With reference to the granite company strike, the quarry workers had their fingers on the pulse of national attitudes regarding the grueling conditions of industrialized labor. Since the beginning of industrialization, workers protested long work days and dangerous working conditions through marches and strikes. These demonstrations only grew in frequency

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<sup>26</sup> "Women Led the Temperance Charge," Prohibition: An Interactive History, Mob Museum, <https://prohibition.themobmuseum.org/the-history/the-road-to-prohibition/the-temperance-movement/>

<sup>27</sup> "Women Led," Mob Museum.

<sup>28</sup> "Women Led," Mob Museum.

<sup>29</sup> Jack S. Blocker Jr., "Separate Paths: Suffragists and the Women's Temperance Crusade," *Signs* 10, no. 3 (1985): 462-464.

throughout the 1800s and 1900s as the effects of industrialization expanded.<sup>30</sup> Factories demanded long hours each day from their workers, and prior to the early twentieth century, there were no legal restrictions on how long was too long for employees to work. Instead, it was left to the company's discretion, which of course meant that they would require their workers to drudge on for as long as they physically could, often for well over ten hours per day.

Many of these positions were tedious and repetitive, as well as dangerous. Textile factories and paper mills were some of the largest nationwide employers during the 1800s, and this kind of work was particularly monotonous as each worker was assigned a specific task that they could not deviate from. For example, in textile plants, women either picked and carded cotton, spun yarn, wove, sized swaths of fabric, or measured and folded out clothes from the fabric.<sup>31</sup> To make things even worse, because the majority of textile factory workers were young women who lived at the factories, many companies had strict rules concerning workers' behavior so their parents would allow them to continue working. They were forced to work in silence for hours on end, and were constantly kept under watch by managers and supervisors. All of these regulations only made their already tedious jobs even more dull. Though some women enjoyed the freedom of living apart from strict families and the independence their work provided, many more women found it demeaning and onerous. Some of these positions, too, were dangerous, and textile workers often caught deadly illnesses due to the dampness and poor ventilations in factories.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jessica Piper, "The Great Railroad Strike of 1877: A Catalyst for the American Labor Movement," *The History Teacher* 47, no. 1 (2013): 93-95.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Dublin, "Women and the Early Industrial Revolution in the United States," Gilder Lehrman Institute, <https://ap.gilderlehrman.org/essay/women-and-early-industrial-revolution-united-states>.

<sup>32</sup> Nancy J. Barrett, "The Struggles of Women Industrial Workers to Improve Work Conditions in the Progressive Era," *OAH Magazine of History* 13, no. 3 (1999): 44.

Meanwhile, men in nineteenth century America faced different injustices. While young women were sent to factories because their labor was so cheap, men were made to do difficult, strenuous hard labor. Many men, particularly immigrants, found work in the construction, quarrying, and mining industries.<sup>33</sup> Their days, too, were dull, and could also be quite dangerous, though in a different way; their work involved backbreaking physical labor, such as hauling and splitting rocks, digging in deep trenches, and laying bricks. Just as there were no laws that limited the amount of time employees could work, there were few safety precautions in these professions as well, and workplace incidents occurred extremely frequently during this period.

Due to the harsh circumstances of work in the nineteenth century, many laborers fought for better conditions, and women in America were a large part of labor movements. In 1824, Pawtucket, Rhode Island saw a strike when workers' hours were increased and their pay was cut.<sup>34</sup> The company proceeded to diminish the longer hours by shortening the times allotted for meals. In the 1830s, female laborers in Lowell, Massachusetts established the Lowell Factory Girls Association to fight back against cuts in wages.<sup>35</sup> Each labor movement meant the emergence of more, and soon workers in cities began to form unions and political parties that addressed their needs. Much like the rest of the country, the quarry laborers in Rockport argued for conditions that workers all across America argued for as well: a nine hour workday and pay

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<sup>33</sup> "Rise of Industrial America, 1876-1900: Overview," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/rise-of-industrial-america-1876-1900/overview/>.

<sup>34</sup> "Early Industrialization in the Northeast," Rice University, <https://www.oercommons.org/courseware/lesson/15440/overview>.

<sup>35</sup> "Early Industrialization," Rice.

for working overtime. The nine hour workday soon became the eight hour workday, legally passed in 1938 along with overtime compensation.<sup>36</sup>

The operations of social closure at play in these specific moments in Rockport's history are incredibly interesting to look at. In the case of both the women who spearheaded Rockport's temperance movement and the town's quarry laborers, group formations had to be narrowed because the foundations of these groups were ideological, and though they were connected to larger social attributes and identities like gender and class, they were wholly concerned with meeting these ideological goals.

The women of Rockport's temperance movement needed to institute a specific kind of social closure. As married women in the nineteenth century, a massive part of their social worlds involved their husbands and male neighbors, but these people soon became the subjects of their anger and frustration. As the men's drinking worsened, it became clear to these women that they had to band together against the people who had formerly been such an enormous part of their community. Though the women's position against the men of the town was perhaps more complicated than pure antagonism, as the temperance movement aimed to not only improve their own lives, but also the lives of their husbands and the men of the town.

This instance of closure began just after the town's drunken Fourth of July celebrations, when the women first decided that they had to take matters into their own hands and stop the men's drinking on their own. They broke off from the community of Rockport as a whole and began to meet in secret, solidifying their own association in their opposition to the abuse of

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Grossman, "Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938: Maximum Struggle for a Minimum Wage," U.S. Department of Labor, 1978, <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/flsa1938>.

alcohol that they saw the town's male population participating in. The type of social closure involved in the temperance movement is remarkably interesting, as the women's raid on Rockport's liquor cemented their own ideological separations from their husbands and friends—people who they knew personally, had relationships with, and loved.

The nature of this kind of closure is undeniably complex; it involved the women fighting for their own principles and improving their own lives, but also attempting to improve the lives of the men of Rockport, too. Their goal was not to ultimately and finally create a distinct and permanent social closure; rather, it was to form a separate group temporarily to achieve their objective. In fact, their goal was about unity as a community; the women of the temperance movement used social closure as an impermanent tactic in order to facilitate one holistic, cooperative society within their town. Instead of holding onto this separation, they wielded it to advance their mission.

An interesting aspect of the social closure employed by the women of the temperance movement here is that although they applied it against their husbands and other people that they were close to, it worked, and, on the whole, the men of Rockport saw how seriously they took the matter of their drinking, and acquiesced to establishing Rockport as a dry town. This type of social closure was a risk that the women of Rockport took: because it was between them and their families, it could have easily turned sour, as precious kinship ties were strained and even fractured. But, fascinatingly, it was precisely *because* of these drastic measures that the men respected their campaign. By establishing this exclusion against their husbands and fellow residents, the temperance advocates managed to convey the meaningfulness and gravity of their intention.

The striking quarry workers too had to institute exceptional sorts of social closures. As the laborers in Rockport's quarry grew increasingly frustrated at the quarry operators' lack of recognition for their labor and consideration for the grueling working conditions they were subjected to, they formed a compact community—and in turn in, shut out those who were a part of their previous community, but who were not as focused on labor issues—in order to carry out their labor strike.

The quarry workers relied on two separate forms of closure: one against the quarry company executives themselves, and one more complex type against the Italian strikebreakers that the company had brought in to fill the labor gap. With regard to the quarry company, the Finnish strikers made their position clear: they would not go back to work until their demands for nine hour work days and compensation for working overtime were met. The mode of social closure involved in labor strikes is unambiguous. Within strikes, laborers band together to create a distinct restrictive community in an explicit demonstration of solidarity with one another. This kind of solidarity is an example of another type of social closure that Parkin identifies as “usurpation:” “Countervailing action by the ‘negatively privileged,’ on the other hand, represents the use of power in an upward direction in the sense that collective attempts by the excluded to win a greater share of resources always threaten to bite into the resources of legally defined superiors.”<sup>37</sup> The subordinate groups that are created by the exclusionary closure of privileged groups, Parkin explains, attempt to take over the resources and benefits of the privileged groups.

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<sup>37</sup> Parkin, “Marxism and Class Theory,” 144.

Equally important in this particular kind of social closure is the emphatic, categorical exclusion of a specific group of people, i.e. the company that the laborers united against. Within Rockport's quarry strike, the laborers based this solidarity and exclusion heavily on their identity as workers who were being exploited, pushing back against the company's executives who did not endure the same things that the quarry workers did, and fighting for the privileges that their bosses had: higher pay and less arduous work.

The form of social closure that the workers utilized in regards to the Italian strikebreakers is more complicated than their direct opposition to their bosses at the company. What is interesting about this particular example of a social closure is that the strikers attempted to pull the Italian workers into their newly formed association twice. Firstly, when the Italian laborers were brought in from Boston, the Finnish strikers attempted to explain to them why they were striking against the business, as they were fairly certain that the managers of the quarry had not informed them of the strike at all. As they explained the circumstances of their strike, they expected that the Italians would understand and subsequently join their cause. The Italians, however, remained frightened of the tensions and the anger they had seen, and continued to work in the quarry.

The second time that the quarry strikers had attempted to pull them into their movement occurred almost two months after their first endeavor, when the hostility between the striking laborers and the company's executives had reached a boiling point. On the night of April 20th, 1899, when nearly two hundred Finnish strikers had advanced with clubs and rocks toward the quarry, they stopped outside of the building where the Italians had shuttered themselves inside. From outside the house, the group had called out to the Italians, urging them to come and fight

back against the company alongside them, but the Italians, still scared of the anger and impending violence, stayed inside.

In this pivotal moment, the striking crowd shifted their outrage from their employer and onto the Italian workers who would not stand in solidarity with them—the social closure was sealed in real time. The crowd outside finalized this establishment of two distinct groups who were now at odds by bombarding the outside of the building with rocks and sticks. It was, at this moment, clear to the striking laborers that they were alone in their opposition to the company. Their anger at the Italians came from the Italians' refusal to stand in solidarity with them.

Rather than the usurpatory closure they adopted to fight against those in charge of the granite company, aimed at gaining some of the privileges their bosses had, in this moment, the strikers had attempted to draw the Italian laborers into their own social closure. They had extended themselves out to a group whom they thought would stand alongside them. When this did not happen, the strikers closed off their group to the Italians, employing a type of exclusionary social closure. What is so interesting about this kind of exclusion is that it wasn't so fixed as the terms of exclusion Weber discusses; rather than exclusion on the basis of identity, the strikers excluded the Italian workers on the basis of belief and because of their lack of action.

In fact, the strikers had attempted to *include* the Italians, presuming that they would join them precisely because of their identity as workers. Though this was not the justification for them excluding the Italians, identity and broader social connections like occupation played a large part in why the Finnish strikers believed the Italians would stand with them, and perhaps explains why they felt so betrayed when they didn't. Both the Finnish quarry workers and the Italians were immigrants who worked manual labor jobs. Because of these two important commonalities

between them, it made sense why the strikers expected the Italian laborers to band together with them: they were both in vulnerable positions that the company's administrators could and did take advantage of.

The striking workers had attempted to form a social closure with the Italians based on these two identities of ethnic background and occupation, a rather direct illustration of Weber's theory of exclusionary social closures predicated on social identities. But it was only when this attempt at incorporation into their movement didn't work that the strikers utilized this other type of exclusion, centered on conviction, or lack thereof.

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For the women of Rockport and the quarry laborers, it was crucial to create more narrow, precise social closures in order to facilitate their respective campaigns—ones that stretched beyond the boundaries of the social closure that lay within Rockport as a small town. Both of these groups of people saw that others in their community didn't share the same beliefs that they did, and because of this difference, formed their own groups to oppose the people who conflicted with their ideas of what was right.

Creating these closures was not an easy task for either group. The prohibitionists had to breach their familial ties, moving against their husbands. Rockport's striking quarry workers had to grapple with the perceived betrayal by the Italian laborers, who shared important social connections and identities with them. The social closures at play within these two moments in

Rockport's history involved breaking from the larger closure of the town, a profoundly difficult measure to take.

## Chapter 2

During my fieldwork, I met with many of my friends and neighbors in Tivoli, some by chance encounters, and some by planned meetings. I was interested in the ways that socializing worked in this landscape of the pandemic, specifically in a small town like Tivoli, and specifically within the population of Bard students that live here.

Composed of about four streets, the majority of Tivoli is residential, though its population is only around eleven-hundred people. There are a few well-loved establishments in the center of town: an artsy hotel, a posh general store, a charming bakery, and a smattering of restaurants. The town is more or less evenly split between families and Bard students who live off-campus. In the winter, many of the shops close early, and most people avoid the brutal temperatures by staying indoors. Normally, in the spring and summer, flower gardens abound, and the town fills with tourists who usually take up residence in the hotel by the town center.

The pandemic has shifted these dynamics. In COVID, it isn't uncommon to see residents walking around and getting takeout from the restaurants in the town's center, but the large groups of Bard students and tourists are less frequent, and people mostly socialize by walking with or inviting a few friends to their porches and yards. There's less commotion, fewer parties and gatherings. Much of the time, friends plan to see each other, rather than spontaneously convening.

One noteworthy way that I observed Bard students maintaining their friendships was by the establishment of “pods”: groups of a few friends that continue to see each other—sometimes indoors and without masks—by agreeing on a set of behavioral rules surrounding COVID. Members of a pod often have deliberate conversations about what they can and cannot do in order to minimize the risk of COVID exposure in an attempt to ensure the safety of themselves and their fellow pod members. Most of the time, deciding who can be a part of one’s pod is a very mindful, methodical process, wherein pod members think carefully about their friends’ attitudes and behaviors they’ve observed during the pandemic; someone who frequently goes to parties, for example, might not be allowed into a pod because their behavior may be deemed too hazardous for the rest of the group.

Other Bard students are less structural in determining who they see, and instead of forming pods, choose what friends they feel comfortable seeing on a case-by-case basis. Some pose logistical questions to their friends before they agree to hang out, like asking when their friend last received a COVID test. Many Bard students I talked to feel comfortable walking outside with people, and some believe that the biweekly COVID testing Bard requires of its students is enough assurance to allow friends inside of their homes.

Most of the Bard students I talked to based their decisions on the feelings of other people they know, relying on a collective decision-making process. But these choices about who to see and how often aren’t set in stone or especially simple. Instead, they are based on complicated social, political, and psychological negotiations that are constantly changing. Decisions about socializing during COVID involve a combination of hard questions, epidemiological knowledge, and personal emotions, which can often muddle relationships between friends.

These difficult decisions work as a form of social closure, albeit a reluctant one. By deciding who is in one's pod or who one feels comfortable with seeing, the *exclusion* of certain friends is inevitable. This kind of group formation isn't a direct example of Weber's theory of exclusionary social closure: instead, it complicates his picture. COVID forces friends to create these tighter, smaller groups inside of an already delineated closure—by which I mean the tight-knit, small community of Tivoli itself.

### Emilia

I had scheduled a walk with Emilia, who lives just across the street from me. Over text, we decided to grab coffee from the bakery and roam around Tivoli. We bundled up against the wind, and met on the road in front of our houses.

“I actually just saw that the bakery's closed today,” she told me. “But we could go to Tiv Gen,” she offered, referring to the small general store, which also sells coffee and overpriced pastries.

“Okay,” I replied, and we walked down our street towards the main road.

This was the first time we'd spent time together in person since before the start of COVID, and we spent the walk to Tivoli General catching each other up about our summers, our classes, and our senior projects.

When we arrived at the store, we each bought the same thing: a coffee and a slice of blood orange cake.

“Should we sit?” she asked, once we'd returned outdoors, pointing to the little metal table and accompanying chairs on the sidewalk outside.

I hesitated for a moment, a little nervous about sitting outside when there are so many people walking by. I hadn't actually sat at a public space since before COVID began, particularly one designed for eating. But we were in Tivoli, and it seemed safe enough, so I agreed.

We took a seat, drinking coffee and nibbling at cake, while we did the customary run-through of our schedules. After a few minutes, most of our cake slices were gone, and I asked Emilia if we should walk a bit more.

She nodded, and we got up, moving down Broadway east toward Montgomery Street.

This moment was one of the first moments I noticed the habit of relying on other peoples' perceptions of safety surrounding COVID. Even though I wasn't entirely sure that sitting down together outside was a good idea, I allowed myself to rely on Emilia's analysis of the risk that sitting down would entail. In that moment, I felt pressured, slightly, to relent, not wanting to be either the naysayer or the paranoiac. But there was more than a feeling of peer pressure or a fear of being judged that was going on in that decision, too.

Since the start of the pandemic, the world has been wrapped up in constant mental calculations about risk and safety. We have been made to think nonstop about our own—and others'—security. Questions like: *If I sit here, how likely is it that someone will cough into the air as they're walking past and that drop of respiratory fluid will land on me and give me COVID? or I'm out of hand sanitizer but I just got back in the car from the grocery store and I don't know who touched what. What did the CDC just say about it spreading through surfaces?* have invaded our minds for nearly a year now.

In this exchange I had with Emilia, she provided me with a way out of all of that; suddenly, I was able to shut off the incessant hypotheticals and just agree to something simple, because she was the one making the decision. Once the choice was made, my anxiety dissipated. It was as if the only thing that was making me so nervous was the anxiety itself, the vague space in which I was forced to think about the risks of COVID and the ethical dilemmas wrapped up in it. But because she had pointed to the chairs and asked so casually, “Should we sit?” this space seemed to no longer be relevant to me, or to the situation on the whole.

The dependence I felt with Emilia in that moment was also connected to my broader, non-COVID relationship with her. It wasn’t just that I trusted her behavior during the pandemic or knew that she took it seriously, but it was also that I knew *her* well and trusted her as a person. It seemed incredibly easy to extend my general trust in her to my trust in her behavior surrounding COVID; the two things did not seem so separate in my mind. Perhaps this is because, in reality, they haven’t been made so separate in the discussions about COVID.

One of the strangest parts of living through this pandemic has been the conflation of epidemiology and ethics. People make judgements on one another’s personalities or politics depending on their responses to COVID safety measures, like washing their hands or wearing masks. It isn’t uncommon for people to post photos to social media of other people in public spaces who have their masks pulled below their noses or who aren’t wearing masks at all. More recently, it’s become something of a trend for people to upload photos of themselves with their vaccination cards, or even photos of their arms, bandaids and all. Profile pictures all across the internet show selfies of people wearing their masks: i.e. being good citizens.

Because of the fusion of these two separate issues, people are labelled good or bad, responsible or irresponsible, caring or selfish. We are pressured to label the people in our own lives like this as well. People wearing double masks are good, people not staying far apart from others in the grocery store are bad. The extension of my trust in Emilia as a person to Emilia's COVID safety habits seemed logical to me; after all, isn't that what we'd been directed to do throughout this past year?

Connected to this sense of wanting to trust someone else's analysis of COVID safety is the identification of Tivoli as a "safe space," a thought which ran through my mind as I hesitated in front of the table. In a way, seeing Tivoli as a space free of COVID is a resistance to our own employment of social closures. After our walk, I started to think about what made me and other people I know consider Tivoli a safe space: we see our neighbors every day, we see other Bard students walking on campus. The town itself is cloistered off, close to only the river and to Bard's campus. We (Bard students in Tivoli) are still going to campus, still going to our various jobs, still walking and sitting outside. The only hint that COVID is still a threat is our masks, which we wear in town and sometimes to one another.

But with many other Bard students—our friends, our neighbors—we don't wear masks, and although we're not going into each others' homes as we would with members of our pods or closures, there is a partial extension of the kind of behavior we practice within our pods.

Perhaps this extension exists because the formation of smaller social closures within an already small community—Tivoli and the community of Bard students here—is a perplexing and messy business. We have become used to the larger closures of Tivoli and Bard, and now, though

these closures have indeed narrowed into pods of friends for a year, the transition is still something of a shock.

Being students at Bard who live in Tivoli only accentuates this blurriness—we are in a community within a community. And with COVID, we then have to make other, smaller communities for ourselves inside of those two. But of course, college is still going on, and Tivoli is still here, so it's much harder to completely align ourselves with these smaller communities, our social closures.

Ethan, Tatiana, Mara, Eva

A week or so after my exchange with Emilia, I was walking over to my partner's house. On their neighbor's side of the porch, a group of people had gathered. My partner's neighbor, Mara, and her roommate, Eva, sat on their wicker couch on the porch, and two of their friends, who I also know, were seated in the small plastic chairs they have on the lawn. It was windy that day, and everyone was smoking cigarettes. As I rounded the corner onto their lawn, they waved to me.

"I have an ethical question for you," Ethan, one of the friends on the plastic chairs, called out to me.

I nodded, ready to answer.

"Do you think it's wrong to get the vaccine before you're eligible? We've been having a debate."

I paused for a moment, considering his question. “No, not really. I mean, they fucked up the rollout so badly that it’s kind of on them. Plus the more people that are vaccinated the better it is for everyone.”

My response seemed to have been the earlier consensus reached by the group, because they all nodded their heads and affirmed that yes, it is for the greater good.

“Exactly!” Tatiana, Ethan’s roommate, said.

“Are you getting the vaccine?” I asked Ethan.

“Yeah, me and Mara are going on Wednesday,” he told me, pointing up to Mara on the porch, who shook her head yes. “I’m a little worried though.”

“About lying to them?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “I’ve heard they don’t check, but it’s still kind of stressful.”

“I’ve also heard they don’t check,” I said. “Josh got it on Saturday, and he said they didn’t ask him for anything. But he did get pretty sick,” I told him, referring to my partner’s roommate.

“How did he get it?” Ethan asked me.

“He got a job working as a prep cook in Catskill.”

The rest of the group seemed more concerned about Josh’s side effects than his qualifications for getting the vaccine, and Mara turned to me. “He got sick?” she asked.

“Yeah, he was really tired and nauseous. It knocked him out for like a whole day,” I told them.

“Which one did he get, do you know?” asked Tatiana.

“Johnson and Johnson,” I replied.

“Oh, that might be why,” said Eva, Mara’s roommate. “It’s only in one dose, right?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I feel like that could make everything worse, versus the two doses.”

We all nodded at this; it made sense to us.

“Which one are you guys getting?” I asked Mara and Ethan.

“I think it’s Moderna,” said Mara. “It’s the one in Albany.”

We nodded at this too, finding some consolation in the fact that it’s a different vaccine than the one Josh received.

After a few more minutes of discussion about the process of getting a vaccine and our worries about illness, I headed inside the house, waving goodbye to everyone.

Following this conversation, I was still thinking about my dependence on Emilia’s risk-analysis when we went to get coffee together. I realized that this debate about the ethics of getting a vaccine early is strikingly similar to relying on other people’s safety analyses; in Tivoli, we depend on each other’s knowledge of news and updates about COVID, both within our own community and beyond. It isn’t that we don’t keep up with the news ourselves—most everyone I know has been glued to the *New York Times* app for the past year—but staying up to date about the latest statistics and developments has turned into a collective process, something to be shared and thought through together.

As people around the world check the news religiously looking for updates, it is incredibly easy to get tunnel vision about COVID, and subsequently to magnify our anxieties about the state of the world because of it. When we carry all of this information inside of our heads, it becomes overwhelming and exhausting, much like our constant deciphering of risk-calculations.

The solution, then, is to talk about it with others, to process it. This is as much a kindness to other people as it is a way to cope with it individually.

This practice is partially a performance of our own knowledge, too. Throughout the pandemic, not being informed has been a major faux pas. As cases rise, safety regulations shift, and vaccines are made more widely available, it is crucial for everyone to stay on top of new developments so that we know how we should be behaving. Knowledge hasn't just been valuable this past year, it's been essential for our survival.

Of course, this process isn't just the sharing of knowledge and information. It's also analyzing what we know together, in an attempt to make sense of it. We want to hear others' opinions and feelings, even if they just mirror our own. In this interaction I had with the group, we all shared the opinion that it was okay to jump the vaccine line, since it benefitted everyone if as many people as possible were vaccinated. Still, we found reassurance that each of us had reached the same conclusion as the others. Maybe it meant we were right about it, or at least that we were thinking about it in the right way.

Another interesting aspect of this interaction was the way that the debate and listening to each other's opinions held our interest. Everyone I've talked to has felt the weight and exhaustion of constantly thinking about COVID. It seems that one way to mitigate this burnout is to turn it into a debate, a discussion heavily involving ethical dilemmas and personal morals. In this way, instead of feeling burdened by the perpetual barrage of data and instructions, we are able to engage with it in a different way. By preoccupying ourselves with the intellectual and moral facets of the issue, we can relate to it more sincerely and more personally than we would if we

were simply repeating facts. Debates surrounding COVID practices become a way for us to continue to stay involved in the news about it without becoming tired of it.

### Mara

One evening, in the beginning of March, there was a massive windstorm, and Tivoli's already fragile internet went out. I was meant to write a short paper for a class in the morning, but the whole town relies on the same wifi service, and it was too late to go to campus. I was a bit annoyed, and decided that procrastination was warranted, so I went for a walk. The wind gusts were enormous, and the moon was incredibly full. I pulled my scarf tighter and turned down Montgomery Street, heading south. Nobody was out. As I passed my partner's house, I saw their next door neighbor, who they share a porch with, sitting on the stoop. She was staring up at the moon, a cigarette in hand. I waved, and she motioned for me to come over.

"Have you seen the moon?" she asked me, smiling.

"Yeah, it's crazy."

"We've gone analog tonight, but the radio keeps cutting out, so I decided to admire her," she told me.

I took a seat on the steps near her. "Yeah, I have a paper due tomorrow but I can't research anything. Maybe I'll just read. I just finished Lincoln in the Bardo and I've been looking for something like it," I replied.

"Oh, that's tough. Isn't the deal with that book that there's nothing like it?"

I laughed. "Pretty much."

She's a written arts major, and devours books on a daily basis. She jumped up a bit. "Ooh, have you read any Miranda July?"

"No," I admitted. "The name sounds familiar though."

"Oh my god, you'll love her. 'No One Belongs Here More Than You' is I think the only collection of short stories I've ever finished."

"I love short stories!" I told her.

"Hang on," she said excitedly. "I'll grab it as soon as I finish this," gesturing to her cigarette.

A minute or so later, she rushed inside and soon emerged with a bright yellow paperback book. "You'll have to finish these fast though, I pick this up all the time."

During the pandemic in Tivoli, there's been a strong sense of shared experiences. We are all feeling the effects of COVID and quarantine, and we all entered into it together. In many ways, it reminded us of our connections, particularly for Bard students, who went through the whole process of college moving online together. This is comforting to think about—it's maybe the one comfort we have had over the past year. This connection reminds us of other connections too, especially in a place like this, where we are all clustered together, and especially because our worlds have gotten so much smaller. When the windstorm in Tivoli took out the internet, it also took out our lifeline to the outside world, the thing we have been reliant on for months. But there are other lifelines here, in town. It feels much like the start of the pandemic itself: we were cut off from everything very suddenly, and everyone else was too. This is a shared experience, and everyone is hungry for more of those. When Mara gave me her book, she was extending a shared experience—a bit of herself and what she has been up to—to me.

Another important aspect of these shared experiences is the knowledge that college is temporary. Many of us are graduating this year, and don't yet know where we will be. We are aware that our interactions with each other are limited and finite, which only increases our desire to see each other. We don't want to miss out on any chances to encounter one another, because we don't know what our friendships will look like once we leave.

The proxemics in relation to Mara are quite interesting to consider as well. We only became friends last semester, during quarantine, and so we've never been inside each other's houses. Instead, we instituted a ritual known as "coffee on the porch," wherein we try to provide some incentive for ourselves to get up early. This accountability system only sometimes works; more often than not, we convene sometime in the late afternoon. The setup of the porch allows us the freedom to not have to consider the safety concerns of being too close to one another, as the space intuitively provides room to spread out. It is a duplex house, with my partner's front door on the front, right in the middle of the porch. The neighbors use the left side, and my partner and their roommates use the right side. On Mara's side is an upholstered couch and two chairs, and on my partner's side is a camping chair, two broken wooden chairs, and a small table. Instinctively, when we are having coffee on the porch together, I sit on my partner's side, or sometimes, when the sun is hitting them, on the wide steps leading up to the porch. Because of the physical layout of the space, we have been spared the complicated and sometimes awkward spatial negotiations that so often happen with friends and neighbors during COVID.

Frankie

I saw my freshman-year roommate Frankie, who took the previous semester off and went to Scotland, outside of my friend Charlotte's house. I hadn't seen them since the summer. I was on the porch, soaking up the little bit of warmth from the rare January sun. They were walking down the street, just in front of my house.

"Frankie?" I called out.

They turned, not seeing me for a moment. I waved, and when they caught my eye, they waved back.

"Hey," they said.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Good," they replied. "How are you?"

We caught up a bit, them standing in the road in front of me, me standing on my stoop. At one point, I realized that I was quite far up above them, and became self-conscious. I walked down the three rickety steps that lead up to my porch and came to stand in the little patch of dead grass that makes up my front lawn.

We talked about Scotland, and classes, and what it was like for them to come back to Bard. Frankie asked me about my house.

"Oh yeah, I moved in in like late November, early December," I told them. "Where are you living? Are you still in that apartment without the backyard?" I remembered, back in April when they told me where they were moving, how upset they were that they'd have to give up the beautiful view of the mountains and the spacious lawn they'd had at their old house.

"No, I didn't like it. I'm between the church and the firehouse now."

"Oh in that little white house with the cool windows?" I asked them.

“Yeah,” they said.

“Is that where they had that Berlin rave party freshman year?” I wondered.

“Yeah,” they laughed. “I got the upstairs.”

I remembered the upstairs they were talking about well, a stretched-out room with jutting, angular walls. “Oh nice,” I told them.

We spent a bit more time discussing houses and Tivoli, before they had to leave.

“Okay,” they said. “I really have to go eat this turkey burger.” They held up a little circle of tinfoil so I could see. “I haven’t eaten anything all day.”

I laughed, and we said goodbye, with the promise of a walk in the near future. They headed off toward their house, and I sat back down at the top of my steps.

Since the start of the pandemic, spatial negotiations and proxemics within social interactions have drastically shifted. When I saw Frankie walking down my street, I felt compelled to call out to them. I didn’t move from my spot on the porch immediately, as I didn’t quite know what the nature of the interaction would be, or how long it would last. I also felt more conscious than usual of the virus at that moment; I knew they had come back from Scotland at some point recently, and perhaps they had traveled more since. When it became clear that we would continue to talk for at least a few minutes, my towering above them on my porch seemed, to me, rude or even unfair. I didn’t want to be above them, in any sense, and my movement down the stairs to my front lawn was a gesture. Though we didn’t hug, or get too close to one another, my descent served as an offering of friendship.

Another spatial connection between us was the shared reference of the room they moved into; we had both been there before they signed the lease, and so we had a point of commonality within that knowledge. Because Tivoli is a small, college town, the landscape is constantly changing, and most everybody has some connection to everybody else's house.

Nearly a month later, I ran into Frankie again, just before sunset. They were standing on my street with a massive, old camera in their hands, pointing it down on some ice next to the pavement of the road.

"Hey," I called out.

They turned to see me walking toward them, camera still held up to their eye. "Hey," they said back.

I moved closer.

"Look at this," they told me, and handed me the camera. It was much heavier than I thought it would be. "Point it over there," Frankie said, pointing to the little sliver of sinking sun, just visible between my neighbor's fence posts.

I put it to my eye and pressed the trigger, after they told me how to see through it.

"It's a 16 millimeter," they said proudly.

"Is this for your photo class?" I asked them.

They nodded. "I'm gonna have to get up at like six tomorrow. I just missed golden hour."

"Yikes," I said. "But this is really pretty, anyway."

I was hungry, so we parted ways so I could make dinner. I turned back to see them just as I'd found them, their head bent in front of the camera, hunched to see the ice pool.

Between my first and second interactions with Frankie, something in my thinking shifted; our second meeting was much different than our first. In this moment, by reaching out to take the camera they offered me, I was questioning and *resisting* the boundaries of the social closure I had formed previously, with my partner and their roommates. Generally in Tivoli, when we haven't seen our friends for a while because they've been elsewhere, Bard students recognize the risk that these other friends pose toward the preservation of this space as it stands: the preservation of our separate but coexistent pods or social closures. During my first interaction with Frankie, I was incredibly cognizant of this risk they posed to my social closure.

But these hard lines are incredibly difficult to draw, especially with our friends and especially during such an emotionally taxing time. When I saw Frankie for the second time, the foundation of our previous interaction had been laid down, and though that time we had been socially-distanced, it was easy to tell myself that it was fine to come close to them.

The pandemic has amplified our desire to connect to one another, to share experiences beyond COVID. These desires are so strong that, sometimes, they can push us to override our preformed social groupings. The process of establishing social closures within the community of Bard students in Tivoli was necessitated by the pandemic; we did not do it of our own volition, but rather it was a directive, coming in the form of "socialize with fewer people," or in some cases, a pragmatic but reluctant decision. Essentially, they are already fragile because they weren't established with any eagerness. So when the perimeters of these closures are pushed—even just slightly, even just by the proffering of a camera—it becomes quite easy to break from them.

### Mara Interview

On a warm day in late March, I texted my friend and my partner's next-door neighbor, Mara, to ask if she'd be willing to do an interview with me about her socializing habits during COVID. Within ten minutes, I received an enthusiastic, affirmative text back, and an hour later, I was walking over to her house. We met on her porch, and her roommate was sitting beside her on their wicker couch. Mara asked me if I wanted to go to the backyard, to sit in the sun, and we walked back to the little glass table and chairs arranged in the lawn.

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*Ruth:* So, my first question is, what is your general attitude towards COVID safety precautions like social distancing and masks?

*Mara:* I think it's changed recently. I was a lot more strict in the fall when I was working full time in a restaurant, because...it felt a lot more like the general public was in my hands. And I just felt a lot more antagonized by the general public, because they were the ones who were close to me without a mask on and my, you know, income depended on being nice to them and not asking them to put their mask on. I think I've loosened up in that I'm a lot more social now. It was becoming dire to be social. So, I just, I think my attitude is one of transparency. There is a pod. We're not the tightest pod, because there are roommates that get involved. But, um, yeah, there's a core group of six people that I see that I don't worry about masks and distance and stuff.

We share meals, we share cigarettes, whatever. But...I think...when it comes to like, if I see someone I know on campus, and I want to give them a ride home, windows down, wear my mask in the car. I try not to get too close to people in class, even though we're masked. Don't take my mask off at work, that kind of thing. So lenient about the pod, but I do have a pod and my pod goes somewhere, see someone outside of the [usual], I expect them to tell me, vice versa.

*Ruth:* So you, you give transparency and expect transparency in your pod?

*Mara:* Yeah. And we discuss it a lot, what all of our expectations are because we don't all have the same comfort levels or the same health. And, you know, we discuss often how we're placing our trust in one another when we choose to be in a pod together. And we'll go — I mean, my roommates and I, I feel like every other week or every two weeks, we'll just put a pause on Pod. I'll be like, "Hey, we're not gonna see you guys for a little 'cause we're kind of nervous because there was a close call" or something like that. And that's also just helpful to be productive. Yeah, to not have the choice to socialize [she laughs].

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*Ruth:* So, did you guys...like did all of your pod like have conversations with each other about podding up?

*Mara:* Yeah, but that was kind of the hard part is—because some members of the pod are a little less...nervous than others, it was, like, sort of a battle to get them to talk seriously about it. And that becomes a whole conversation in itself, it's like, "Oh, well, when I talked to you about

pod protocol, you told me you basically don't care about COVID, and you know, that makes me nervous” and that kind of thing where you have to say, like, even if people aren't willing to set these hard rules, you get a sense for what their attitude is and that also influences, you know, how they behave in a pod. If someone's sort of...unconcerned, that can be useful, honestly, because otherwise it becomes such a like mind prison and just...paranoia and forgetting the actual logistics of COVID. But...yeah, I think that we just have conversations where it's like, “Oh, you saw this person last week. I know that he sees all those people so I would prefer if we're gonna stay inside together, you not see him regularly.” Because that opens our pod up to, say, three other households, you know. And so just having those negotiations.

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*Ruth:* I'm also just kind of curious about like, the process of you, like, opening up or closing up the house, like, what does that decision process look like?

*Mara:* Generally, it's one or two roommate—there's three roommates here and then one partner who's on and off living here—and it's generally one or two of us go to the others in the living room and say like, “Hey, given the exposure at x, y, z's house, like, would you want to just lock down for a couple days?” And that just means no one else comes inside and we don't go anywhere else, and we'll still see our friends on the porch sometimes. Um, generally, we're the household to do that, and I think it upsets our friends. I mean, they understand, I don't know if they're like mad mad, but, you know, usually a porch sit leads to like, “Well can I please come in,” you know.

*Ruth:* Definitely. Yeah. Um, so how do you guys decide to open back up the house after you've had a lockdown?

*Mara:* I think generally, if the cases either go down or stay the same, and we talk to our friends, and generally it comes with persuasions, you know, where they're like, "I haven't seen anyone and I'm not doing anything. And I'm bored. Please can I come over now?" And then we check the dashboard and we see, and none of us are feeling particularly anxious. I think that's another big part of it is if someone in the pod's just really stressed out at the concept, then we're just not gonna do it yet. Because we don't want anyone in the house to be like, you know, put on edge and feeling unsafe in their house because of—their roommates need to socialize. I think we understand that.

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*Ruth:* So do you...do you think that there are any Bard kids, um, that you maybe wouldn't feel comfortable socializing? Just because of their COVID practices?

*Mara:* Totally. Totally. I mean, there are people who go to the city all the time. And...it's like...I also think sometimes you just get a feel for someone's common sense, and how cautious they are and it's like, if you're taking Uber pools in the city and going to parties in the city, no...no judgment, whatever, do whatever, but I'm not gonna let you in my house, you know. Because—and it's also because maybe if I were living alone, and I didn't have a pod, maybe I would take a risk and see those people. But because I have six other people putting their trust in me, I'm—I can't take the risks with people who I think aren't COVID cautious.

What Mara gave to me in this interview was invaluable insight into how the formation of her social closure within COVID works. Mara told me that she and her roommates decide to “lock down” when there is a close COVID call, usually meaning when someone in their pod has had contact with someone who tested positive for COVID, or simply when someone outside of their pod but within Tivoli tests positive. In addition to this word-of-mouth spread of information, Mara’s house also keeps close tabs on Bard’s “COVID dashboard,” i.e. the place where Bard makes public the number of COVID cases on and off campus. Mara puts a great deal of thought into the scientific data that is immediately relevant to her and her pod—the scientific data that concerns both Bard and Tivoli.

But as I talked more with Mara, I learned that it wasn’t just this kind of logistical thinking about hard data that goes into the mechanism of social closure; it’s also the feelings of the group as a whole. Throughout the whole of the interview, Mara put great emphasis on the feelings of trust and anxiety amidst her friend group.

Mara told me: “...we’re placing our trust in one another when we chose to be in a pod together.” These feelings of responsibility that Mara and her friends have for one another is a major part of what keeps them accountable to each other. In Mara’s pod, transparency about where people have been, who they have seen is expected, and is key to the preservation of the social closure itself.

Feelings of anxiety are also very entangled in Mara’s pod. Mara told me about how she considers it to be productive and useful when members within her social closure are anxious about contracting or spreading COVID, and also how the inverse can help her to both learn more

about her friends, (subsequently informing her decision to see them or not) and help ease her out of the rabbit hole of paranoia and concern that has dominated people throughout the pandemic.

Mara and her pod employ both scientific data and feelings-based negotiations to determine when to see each other and when to not. This kind of conflation of two dramatically different systems of knowledge has been a common theme over the past year, with public health messaging focused on ideas of responsibility to others as well as the increasing politicization and individual signaling of following COVID safety measures or not. Behavior during the pandemic has been regulated by a muddled, puzzling amalgamation of emotions and science, politics and data. This mixing of two different languages makes navigating the rules and expectations of life in a pandemic exceptionally difficult, as the two often contradict or complicate each other.

But this is the sort of information that has been imparted to us, and the kind of information we have to use when enacting these COVID-specific social closures. This is yet another reason why the process of social closures is so convoluted: we are forming them with a fusion of two wildly different systems of knowledge.

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All of these moments with my friends and neighbors in Tivoli provided me with different insights into what it means to socialize during this pandemic, and how this kind of socializing operates. In my interaction with Emilia outside of the general store, and in my debate with Ethan about vaccines, the ways in which we rely on other people became clearer to me—particularly people we trust—to inform our own opinions, general knowledge, and actions regarding COVID.

This kind of interdependence on one another is a vital means of avoiding COVID-based exhaustion, as well as a way of reinforcing our community as Bard students and friends. With regard to Mara and Frankie, I thought a great deal about proxemics during the pandemic, and how difficult it is to maneuver through trying to distance ourselves from our friends.

Each of these interactions with my friends was incredibly important, and expressed very meaningful aspects of social life during COVID that are well worth considering on their own. But they are also deeply connected to a common theme I saw running through these various meetings: this idea of reluctant social closures, and just how complicated they become when they happen within a community that is already decided. Even though at this point, the formation of more compact social groupings isn't new, we are still seeking both collective action and thinking, on a larger scale, and we are still resisting the sharp confines of these limited social closures.

### Chapter 3

As I considered what my third chapter should focus on, I became interested in exploring romantic relationships during COVID, and the implications they have on social interactions amid the pandemic. I'd already thought a lot about and talked to many people about friendship and how they navigate their platonic relationships during quarantine, and, in fact, the idea of researching romantic relationships came up when I was interviewing one of my interlocutors, Mara. Unprompted, Mara told me about how fascinating she found the discussion of dating apps and going on dates in the era of COVID, which, for me, opened up a whole other aspect of the pandemic-world that I hadn't considered before.

While brainstorming my approach to relationship research, I realized that participant-observation would probably be quite difficult to carry, because romantic relationships are intensely intimate, and I can think of very few people who would be comfortable with being observed when spending time with their partner. Because of this, I decided that one route I could take was that of autoethnography. According to anthropologists Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, and Stacy Holman Jones, autoethnography is:

...a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno'). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political/cultural norms and expectations, and they engage in rigorous self-reflection—typically referred to as 'reflexivity'—in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Tony E. Adams, Carolyn Ellis, Stacy Holman Jones, "Autoethnography," *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, (2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>.

In terms of my own project, I began to envisage a chapter in which I could reflect on my own experiences with being in a relationship during the pandemic, as well as conduct a few interviews with people I know who are in relationships.

My partner and I have been together for a little over two years now. We celebrated our first year together last year, just a month before everything shut down for COVID. We met at Bard, through mutual friends, and we too became close friends before beginning our relationship. Through our time together, both us and our circumstances changed significantly; we moved off campus, grew more serious as students, and fell into a rhythm of placid stability with one another.

After a few months of this happy stasis we'd found with each other, COVID hit. We, like the rest of the world, found ourselves lost, anxious, and confused. At the time, we were living together in a small, beaten-up house in Tivoli. We agreed to stay there for a month after our classes had moved online before going back to our parents' homes.

Throughout our time together during COVID, we've both recognized the changes that the pandemic has brought onto our relationship. One of the most notable of these transitions has been that our time alone together has drastically increased, a marked change from the time we spent together with our friends before the pandemic. This is something that my other interlocutors, Claire and Emilia, noted, too.

Usually, relationships in small communities, particularly among college students, are largely situated within partners' social groups; college students in relationships often share friends, go to dinner parties together, and interact with one another's roommates, norms that COVID has significantly altered. All three of the people I talked to about their romantic relationships

remarked on the amount of time they now spent solely with their partners, and provided me with an understanding into how this has shifted the dynamics of their relationships.

### Jacob

Late one night, after a day full of work, I found myself stuck with my writing, staring at the same paragraph I'd just typed up for several minutes. I decided to call Jacob to see if they would be willing to do an interview. They told me they would, but it came with a warning that they were tired and had been working all day. I pulled on my coat and headed down the street towards their house. In their room, I took a seat on the little trunk they keep by the foot of their bed. They sat across from me in their desk chair, and we began.

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*Ruth:* Okay. So...my first question is, uh, can you describe what the beginning of the pandemic was like for you and I—you and your partner?

*Jacob:* I think it's kind of hard to determine what the beginning of the pandemic was...um, because it sort of...just shifted up on us. Um...I guess...I think that at some point, maybe right before everything closed or as everything was closing, we decided...we just agreed that if one of us got it we would quarantine together. [They laugh] And that the both of us would just be in for it. I think that that was...that was um...the start of it for us. Uh...I don't think it was on our shared radar until kind of late.

...

*Ruth:* So...how much time do you spend with your partner on a given day? And do you think that's changed at all due to the pandemic?

*Jacob:* Um...that's kind of a tough one to say because we've definitely spent such...enormous chunks of time together that, um...the diagnosis would probably be kind of scary.

[We both giggle at this]

...

*Ruth:* I guess...maybe if you don't like this question that's fine, um...but I guess what I'm trying to get at more is like...um, maybe let's say now, on a given day, how does—how do we, like, spend time apart, together? What's our sort of rhythm...of that?

*Jacob:* Uh...I think it's pretty push and pull. Uh, where I think—I would guess that it's sort of evenly split between we spend a lot of time together, morning to evening, you know, waking up, going to sleep together, eating, doing errands and chores. And then, time when we concentratedly don't see each other and are getting things done. Um...uh, you, you live right down the street so there's a lot of coming and going and seeing each other for moments and then...going and doing things on our own. Uh, which frankly, is probably what would be going on without COVID, so.

*Ruth:* Yeah. [We laugh]

*Jacob:* You know, I...I don't know if this is gonna get ahead of any questions you're gonna ask but...I mean we never—we never really—um, just because I don't go out we never had like events staggering our relationship in terms [of], you know, couples...social activities. We never...you know, I think...the only thing that I can really think of that changed, in terms of our dynamic was that, you know, we were not—we don't really do work together anymore, because there's no designated place for it that we can go.

...

*Ruth:* Do you think—this is a tricky one to ask...how has being in a relationship affected your social life this past year? Like with friends and roommates?

*Jacob:* I mean, my inclination is to say that it hasn't really. It's sorta just given me one more person to talk to you amongst a very limited number of people...uh...like...well I—two things: one, I think it's probably made me far more willing to be careful about COVID, just because...I feel very comfortable in no small part due to our relationship, and so, you know, I'm not chomping at the bit to see anyone or socialize. It's much easier for me to stay inside and not see anybody, um, outside of the COVID bubble that you're a part of.

...

*Ruth:* Um...okay. Have you had any...disagreements with your partner about COVID habits? And if so, have they been resolved, or not?

*Jacob:* Well, we have, but it's...excessively mundane, so. [They start to smile, looking down.]

*Ruth:* Oh what is it?

*Jacob:* It's the hand sanitizer these days. [I laugh.] I don't give a fuck. I'm half-vaxxed, I've always been filthy, and I rarely get sick, so, ya know. I just—I don't see the need to sanitize my hands all the time. Especially because it has been blasted at me that it does not live on surfaces, so I'm fine keeping my filthy hands. That is—that is, I think, it.

...

*Ruth:* Um, okay. Do you think that COVID has—and just like the effects of the last year—uh, do you think that that's changed our relationship in any way?

*Jacob:* Uh...definitely, yeah. I don't—I don't think it necessarily can be localized just within our relationship, I think that, uh...I don't know, it's...I don't think it's something that can be, like...demarcated or anything like that. Because on the one hand, I would say that it quite possibly maintain—like, ensured that we stayed together. But at the same time, all the difficulties that it kind of brought up...were clearly associated with it, um...in a way where like that question of: is this too much trouble? Like we could assign that all...to COVID. I mean, I think that like, there was definitely a split at the beginning where I was technically handling it pretty well. Um...I mean, it—I'm not gonna pretend that it didn't throw me off because it did. But I managed to, you know, keep up with things, uh, decently well. And you just fell apart. And you were very insistent on falling apart, which really pissed me off. [We both laugh.]

...

*Jacob:* Any other questions?

*Ruth:* Um...that's the end of my list, but I'm kind of just curious about...your thoughts, your musings, on love during a pandemic in general. What do you think about it?

*Jacob:* Uh, romantic love?

*Ruth:* Yeah.

*Jacob:* I don't—I don't know how much, from my experience, it was...it's been truly affected. Um...because you don't—neither of us had a condition that was directly, you know, made us directly threatened by COVID. And, and I think that that, um, that sort of just ensured that—that COVID was just a specter...It never...actually came between us. Uh...I mean—I think that...I mean, I don't know, I think that it definitely...um...reminded us that the line between love and loneliness gets blurred. Or is very blurred.

*Ruth:* What do you mean by that?

*Jacob:* Like, I don't think that, um...I think something that both you and I have often expressed to each other is that we feel very lonely. And that was something that we've expressed to each other before COVID. But I definitely think that it showed up more and more in the pandemic and it...I don't think that that's like...a mark...against love, or our relationship, it's just kind of a reminder that it's not—it just can't be fully satisfying, you know? Like, that kind of...intersubjectivity is not gonna...not gonna cut it when you're twenty one. And...I think when you can't be in the world...you know, it's not a replacement for that.

*Ruth:* Yeah...Do you think it's helped in any ways?

*Jacob:* Yeah! Of course, I do. Um, but...I think that...I mean, I think that it ensures, or ensured, an access to intimacy that a lot of people lost. And that I don't necessarily think about as much because I didn't lose it.

*Ruth:* How—how did other people lose it? Like, just through...you know, going out with their friends...?

*Jacob:* Yes, going out with their friends, like...I think quite literally, contact. I mean, and...and sort of being able to share interior spaces...and all those sorts of things. I think that that...just very minute elements, um, sort of went away. But...I don't know. I think, um...that...I mean, I don't know, I think that, like, love itself is really stripped down.

*Ruth:* Hm...what do you mean?

*Jacob:* Well I don't...think that you have access to those moments when you're seeing your partner amongst other people or in situations that provide a kind of novelty that lets you look at them again in...in a sort of revitalized light, you know, you're—you are always seeing them in the same place or in the same way, um...Which, again, not—that's not to say that...I never look at you and don't feel very overcome—overcame by love. But that's...it's kind of...like it's just that,

it's sort of stripped of extenuating circumstances. Um, I don't know I think that like, as much as it's stabilizing...like, it's not, um...I don't know. It's—it's really...something between two very unstable subjects, and it's kind of a reminder of that. Because there's nothing really to ground it outside of us.

...

*Jacob:* There's just... nothing—there's very little that we can place between us as a common object to focus on and it really always comes back to just each other. Because there's so little to fucking do. [They emphasize each word pointedly, and then laugh.]

*Ruth:* Yeah. [We both laugh.] Yeah...

*Jacob:* You know?

*Ruth:* I sure do.

*Jacob:* Like, we don't eat the same things...you know, we don't read, we don't study the same things...we'll watch TV but, like, that's not even being alive! [We crack up at this.] So, it's really just...meandering, hyper-private conversations.

...

During my interview with Jacob, I was struck by a few things. I hadn't really considered how being in a relationship could make someone more COVID-conscious, in terms of their habits. But, as Jacob put it, because of our relationship, they're not “chomping at the bit” to go out and see people or to go to parties. Although being a couple only involves seeing one other person, during the pandemic, it's easy to rely on that person to act as your friend group, your partner, and your social world, all wrapped up in one.

But that doesn't come without its faults, as Jacob noted. When the world is functioning normally—outside of COVID and quarantine—partners are not expected to be one's whole

social world. In fact, the mark of a healthy relationship is seeing other friends and doing things alone, without one's partner. This has all been turned on its head during the past year. The opportunities to diversify your social circle are no longer there, and it's up to your partner and quarantine pod (if you have one) to provide you with all of your socializing needs. However, of course, that cannot be fully satisfying, and, as Jacob put it, it's not a replacement for being in the world.

Another thing that Jacob mentioned that made an impact on me was the different ways we responded at the very beginning of COVID. While they took the sudden influx of free time as an opportunity to get more work done, without the distractions of everyday life, I found myself filled with anxiety, and had a very difficult time doing anything. When we talk about couples during COVID, we often think of them as operating as a unit, or relying on each other wholeheartedly to get through the difficult parts together. In mine and Jacob's case, we were in very different places mentally, and grew increasingly frustrated with each other because of that. It wasn't a simple matter of leaning on each other; it was a battle to understand each other.

Jacob told me that being partnered in a pandemic ensures a kind of "access to intimacy" that people who aren't in relationships lost. In this way, being in a relationship is a kind of guarantee that your world isn't being completely rearranged; yes, you can't go out to eat or travel, and you have to wear a mask and wash your hands everywhere you go, but you do have this stability in staying with another person. Not everything has completely changed, because you are granted security through another person.

But within this stability lies a lack of freshness as well. Jacob said that during the pandemic, you aren't "...seeing your partner amongst other people or in situations that provide a kind of

novelty that lets you look at them again in...in a sort of revitalized light.” Instead, we are always seeing our partners in a particular context: alone together, and maybe sometimes with roommates or neighbors. In a sense, we lose access to a part of our partners that we had before COVID began.

Throughout my conversation with Jacob, it became clearer to me that they missed these different contexts that before the pandemic, they could see me in. This made sense to me; this kind of lack of diversity is a difficult thing to contend with. We become accustomed to a variety of lenses through which we can see our partners. All of a sudden, COVID has stripped us of these possibilities, leaving us with only one perspective we can understand them with.

...

### Claire

I had had casual conversations with some people who weren't in relationships, and some who had been in relationships when COVID began, and so I decided it would be a good idea to talk to someone who I knew had started a new relationship during the pandemic. I texted my friend Claire to see if she would be interested, and she agreed. We met on a warm, breezy day on campus, outside of Olin, and she asked me if we should find a spot outside. We shouldered our bags and walked over to a sunny pair of lawn chairs on the quad between the dining hall and the science building. Along the way, we caught up about our lives and our classes.

Claire slumped into the chair beside me, angling herself so that she was sideways in the chair, facing me, and I followed suit. She kicked her legs up onto the bit of seat in front of her, and began to tell me the story of how she and her girlfriend had first met and begun their relationship. She told me that her and her partner, Isabella, had had classes together for nearly every semester they'd been at Bard, but hadn't really talked until last semester. "I think I was feeling very, kind of like wanting to meet new people and expand, and it was a seminar, so we would have those mask respite breaks. And she talked to me, just struck up a conversation, like we knew each other, we were friends," Claire told me, pushing the hair out of her face. "And I was very charmed and immediately had a crush on her."

She explained to me that she'd told her roommate, who had then invited Isabella over to their house in Tivoli for dinner. Isabella had an ankle injury at the time, and Claire, who was trying to figure out a way to spend more time with her, offered to drive her to an emergency care clinic in Kingston. From that point on, they clicked, and soon were dating.

I was curious about a typical day during COVID with Claire and her partner, and she told me that she thought the lack of access to indoor spaces had influenced her relationship with Isabella. "I think that made it so that our relationship was, like, heavily placed onto the car as a space, and like driving around and being outside." Claire told me about how she and Isabella also have lots of dinner dates in the car, and will often drive to scenic spots where they can share a meal together.

We soon got to the topic of how Claire's being in a relationship has influenced her social life, particularly with her roommates and close friends. She sat quiet for a second, looking down at the ground, before looking back up and telling me that she had recently listened to a podcast in

which someone was reflecting on relationships during COVID. The person had said that people who were in relationships don't appreciate or understand how difficult living through COVID is for people who aren't in relationships.

She shifted slightly in her seat, and then expressed how she had felt fine with not being in a relationship during the beginning of the pandemic, but how now that she was in one, she feels much more secure. This is something that she feels grateful for and recognizes as a privilege, especially after she heard the podcast.

When I asked her about disagreements with her girlfriend regarding safety habits and precautions during COVID, she described how both she and Isabella often rely on their friends' and families' opinions about COVID and what was or wasn't safe. To illustrate her point, Claire shared an anecdote about a road trip to her hometown that she and Isabella had planned before the start of winter break.

“So we went on a road trip to Atlanta after first semester, and it was kind of something we both really wanted to do, and so we were like, ‘we’re gonna do it, we’re gonna do it,’ and then when the time came, we were both kind of thinking, like, ‘oh, would this be perceived as unsafe by other people?’ And would we be, like, putting our families in danger?” She emphasized these questions by slicing through the air with her hands. “And it wasn’t a disagreement, it was kind of like a ‘we don’t know who has the right answer.’ And both of us, like, want to do this. And both of us feel like it’s playing Russian roulette.”

I sat back a little in my chair, considering the ways myself and other people I know base our COVID behavior on other people we trust.

“I’m sort of wondering how you think the pandemic has generally affected your relationship?” I asked her.

Claire thought about this for a second, and then recounted how she and Isabella had talked about this in the past, and that neither of them were sure if they’d have gotten together if the pandemic hadn’t happened. She told me that a part of what brought her and Isabella together was that she wanted to break out of preformed, existing relationships and friendships that had been dramatically accentuated during quarantine. The more physical circumstances that began their relationship may have been influenced by COVID, too; Claire explained to me that, more likely than not, if the pandemic hadn’t happened, she would have felt less inclined to talk to someone in her class than she would someone at a party or other social gathering.

“I think that happened less to me before the pandemic, and now, it’s kind of like our social interactions are more precious. And so we, like, make more of the littler things,” she said.

I wanted to press on these differences between pandemic and non-pandemic love, and I asked about Claire’s more general thoughts about romance during COVID.

She told me that she thought that, before the pandemic, she was happy to be on her own, independent and free from the expectations of or reliance on other people. She “valued [her] own rhythm.” Even when COVID had just begun, and she had moved back into her parents’ house, she had felt comfortable in her self-sufficiency. But, she said, after over a year of living in a partially quarantined state—and with constant, overwhelming news about the virus—she’s come to really value relying on someone else. At this point in time, she’s learned to really appreciate having the comfort and support that her girlfriend provides.

Claire stopped for a minute to lean down and pull a thermos out of her backpack. She unscrewed the lid and took a sip before setting it down on the arm of the chair behind her.

I was curious about any difficulties that she and Isabella had had that had arisen due to the pandemic. She told me that one challenge or discussion they'd talked about was vaccines. Isabella's family is from Colombia, and don't know how or when they'll get their vaccines.

"I think it's made me consider, like—thinking more about the proximity of people in her life and other people's lives, who just, like, don't have the same access that we have," she said, pulling the sleeve of her shirt down a bit.

We thought about this together, talking about the U.S.' vaccine hoarding and the news coming out of India. She told me about how weird it was to think about how healthy she is and to have the vaccine. After this pause in our relationship-conversation, I asked Claire how she's navigated those of her close friends and roommates who are in relationships.

"I've been starting to be more aware of, like, the divide between people that are in relationships and people that aren't. And I think when I wasn't, it was something that I could kind of like talk about with people who—it feels like this divide, like you go over to the other side, once you're in a relationship, in a way" she said, interrupting herself to assert her analogy. "It's like, you can all bond over the fact that you're single. And it's, like, something you can complain about, but also, like, have fun with and joke about and then when you are you are. And I think there is this, like, conscious feeling that I've had, like—I've had discussions with other people who aren't in relationships, where there's this conscious feeling that like, people migrate to the other side. And then that's like, the end goal, which, I don't think that's how I see it. But I feel like those are discussions that I've had with other people where they're like, 'okay, like, don't take

for granted the fact that like, you can just like, go home and sleep with someone and have comfort if you want it, especially right now.””

...

I was very interested in the spatial component of what Claire was telling me: the car had become a place not just of transportation, but also a destination in and of itself. I saw this kind of transformation happen with other spaces too; my partner’s porch had become a makeshift living room, where people ate and entertained, Mara’s house that was opened up to her pod only sometimes, and Claire’s experience with the mask respite break during her class that led to the start of her relationship with Isabella.

Our spaces during the pandemic, the places we usually socialize in, are no longer available to us in the same ways. As a general rule, we can’t invite people into our homes to watch a movie or go out to eat at a restaurant, so we take it upon ourselves to transform the spaces we do have available, and turn them into different versions of the spaces we are used to. Sometimes, as in Claire’s case, this can be more of a passive happenstance; it wasn’t exactly that she and Isabella had immediately identified the car as a place to have dinner or to hang out in. It was more that the car had served a purpose, and provided them with the opportunity to continue to do the activities they (presumably) would have been doing if there were no pandemic.

Another thing that Claire said that had sparked my interest was the idea of a “divide” between people who don’t have partners and those who do, and the idea of “migrating” to the other side as being the end goal. This distinction struck me as another type of social closure between people

in relationships and people who aren't in them. Within this form of closure, however, there is some room to shift between the two groups, provided that one meets the criteria—either entering into a relationship or ending one.

Throughout my time talking with my friends and interlocutors, I became used to their complex feelings and analyses about so many different aspects of life during COVID. Even when it comes to more categorical features of life in the pandemic, such as the social closures that surround pods of friends, people often express reluctance and even resist the sharp divisions wrapped up in them. For many people, the clear-cut language that dominates the discourse around the pandemic—such as identifying people as “safe” or “unsafe”—and the definitive boundaries within their own social lives during it isn't appealing, and many are much more interested in exploring the nuances of these divisions. To hear Claire describe something as black and white, so matter-of-factly, was fascinating.

In his book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, anthropologist Fredrik Barth discusses how the formation of ethnic groups depends on the existence of the border, writing:

When defined as an ascriptive and exclusive group, the nature of continuity of ethnic units is clear: it depends on the maintenance of a boundary. The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organizational form of the group may change - yet the fact of continuing dichotomization between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.<sup>39</sup>

In Claire's analogy these clear-cut distinctions (“dichotomizations”) represent the edges of the social closures that make up the groups she discusses. They are produced and accentuated by the

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<sup>39</sup> Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1998), 14.

hardships of living through COVID. While the split between people who are single or in relationships exists without the effects of the pandemic, COVID has illuminated and exacerbated this closure, just as it has others: “safe” and “risky” behaviors, people in one’s pod versus those outside of it.

### Emilia

I thought it might be useful to talk to another person who had gotten into a relationship during COVID, so I asked my friend Emilia if she’d be willing to talk to me. One evening, I walked right across the street to her house for the interview. She opened the door for me, and we walked through the living room and up the small staircase to her room. Emilia offered me a seat in her desk chair, and she sat down on her bed, her legs laid flat, stretching out toward me.

She began by telling me that she’d actually begun a new relationship since we’d last caught up that day outside of Tivoli General. This new person, Finn, was a mutual friend of ours, too, and I mentioned that I saw them out on our street a lot of the time. She laughed at this, and then started to tell me the story of how her relationship had started.

Emilia had been seeing a guy, Liam, who went to NYU, but who lived down the street in a housing collective commonly referred to as “Ghost Frat.” She said that the relationship had been going well, but it wasn’t very intense or serious. After about a month and a half of them seeing each other, our mutual friend had told them about their feelings for her. Emilia said that at the time, she wasn’t quite sure what to make of this, especially because the two of them had been

best friends for nearly the entirety of their time at Bard. She asked them if she could think about it for a while, and they agreed. The next day, Liam asked her if she wanted to make their relationship official, and because she still wasn't sure about her feelings about Finn, she agreed. But after about a week, she realized that she didn't want to be with Liam at all, and broke things off. She told Finn that she had broken up with Liam, and they got together.

“Um, but yeah, so a little bit of drama. Like a Gilmore Girls episode or something,” she told me, laughing.

We began talking about an average day with Emilia and her partner, and she said while she couldn't exactly think of an average day, she could describe the time she'd spent with Finn that day: “We see each other every day. Um, maybe like once or twice a week, we'll go to like Kingston or Hudson, like somewhere fun and have a little adventure. But most days it's just like—like this morning, I was studying outside the library and they were like on campus. So they stopped by and hung out for a few minutes. They brought me a kombucha.” She added that the both of them working on their senior projects often made it so that they see each other in small intervals.

When I asked if she thought that COVID had affected her relationship with Finn, she said she wasn't sure, but that in a way, the pandemic has made their relationship a bit less hectic because they aren't going to parties together. “It almost makes it, like, lower pressure. ‘Cause, like, if we were going to a party together we'd be like parading, you know? It makes it more, like, private in a nice way.”

I thought about this, and saw a connection between what Emilia had said and something Claire had said when I had talked to her about the pandemic making her relationship with

Isabella much more based on the car, and, in turn, much more private than it may have been otherwise.

I wondered if Emilia and Finn differed in any way when it came to opinions about COVID or their own, individual approaches to it. She thought about this for a minute, stretching a strand of hair, pulling it straight. After a moment, Emilia told me that she thought she was a little more cautious than them regarding socializing with other people, which she thought may have something to do with Finn's housing situation. They live alone, in a little apartment just a few minutes from her house, which she shares with three other people. While Finn feels more in control of their exposure to COVID, Emilia worries about the consequences of both her actions on her roommates and her roommates' actions on her.

She shared a story with me about a time when these differences of opinion led to a discussion between the two of them.

“There was a time when Finn really wanted to go to this, like, gathering last semester and it was, like, just people who I didn't know super well. And I wasn't going to go because I had work. But I was seeing my grandparents that weekend and I was sort of like—it was awkward 'cause I didn't want to tell them not to go, but like—and normally I would never, like, control their behavior like that, but since it was like my grandparents' health that was at stake, I did sort of, like, encourage them to not go and they didn't end up going. Um, so it wasn't really a disagreement, more so it was like an uncomfortable situation.”

I considered this too: the awkwardness of reconciling other peoples' behavior around COVID with one's own, and just how difficult that was. I mentioned this to Emilia, and she agreed, saying that she really didn't want to “tell them what to do.” She told me that this kind of thing

was tricky to mediate because Finn often gets excited about socializing possibilities, and she sometimes has to remind them of COVID considerations.

I steered the conversation to more of a general discussion, and asked Emilia if she could think of any ways the pandemic has affected her relationship with Finn more broadly. She turned slightly, and reached around her for a glass of water tucked away on the windowsill. She told me that she thought it had absolutely affected their relationship, and that maybe, without the pandemic, they never would have gotten together in the first place. She explained that because there's been less socializing this year, she and Finn spent more time together, as each other's designated person. That intimacy, Emilia thinks, may have enabled accelerated their romantic relationship.

I was also interested in her more general feelings and thoughts about romantic relationships during the pandemic. Emilia talked about how, at the beginning of last summer, she remembered that there was a lot of debate—both online and with people she knew—about whether people should be seeing their partners if they don't share a home together. She told me how she felt torn on this issue, because on the one hand, her concentration in public health meant that she knew, scientifically, that people shouldn't be socializing with anyone outside of their household. But on the other hand, she felt, and still feels, like people who aren't living with those who are at a high-risk level for COVID symptoms should be able to see the person they love. “But I don't know. With my, like, old world-ass, romantic...I do feel it should be okay,” she told me, laughing.

Emilia also provided me with another anecdote about how, back in March when she was sent back home to Queens from studying abroad in Europe, Finn was catching a plane back to their parents' house in Portland. The airport their flight was leaving from was also in Queens, and they

hadn't seen each other since the previous semester. "So they came to hang out at my house for a few hours before flying home. And, um, we tried to stay outside, generally. And at first—their mom's a doctor and so she kind of like provides advice—and at first she was like, you know, 'try not to get too close,' but then after—and then when we were hanging out, she was like, 'well, one hug is fine,' you know? So, yeah. It was a nice, like, fleeting afternoon."

I shared with her a statement I'd frequently heard other Bard students in Tivoli make when they asked me who I was hanging out with, and I told them I was only seeing my partner. They would tell me: "Oh, well of course. I mean, it's your partner. You *can't not* see them."

Emilia nodded, and told me that she felt as though there was something so fundamental about seeing and being with the people you love in one space, unruffled by concerns about COVID. She began to talk about an experience she'd had when visiting her grandparents, who live close by to Tivoli. It was the first time she'd seen them since the pandemic had started, and she was very careful about trying not to spread anything to them. She had gotten a COVID test a few days prior, and was wearing a mask when they let her inside. But she said that they had seemed so sad about it, just the fact that they couldn't see her face fully. "And I was like, 'that's kind of how I feel too.'"

We moved on, beginning a discussion about the ways that the virus has been treated as a black-and-white problem, and Emilia said that she thinks an important part of the conversation is the ways in which peoples' communities—their families, their friends, their coworkers—influence their own perceptions and attitudes surrounding behavior during the pandemic. She thinks that a large part of the issues that govern these drastic variances in

approaches to the pandemic is a lack of understanding about the ways that things like privilege influence peoples' trust in people and institutions.

In a continuation of our conversation about communities and COVID responses, Emilia told me that Tivoli is a “funny place” to consider the implications of COVID.

“It feels sometimes like less pandemic here. You know, like it feels, like, somehow safer, because it's such a small town and we all know each other,” she said, as she tugged the sleeves of her sweatshirt further down her arm.

...

Within our time together, Emilia told me about one positive aspect to the necessitated social closures of her relationship: that she found the lack of opportunity to socialize with big groups of people had made her relationship with Finn more tranquil. Because they weren't going to parties together, the vast majority of their time was spent alone with each other, or sometimes in the presence of Emilia's roommates. The intimacy that these closures, enabled by the pandemic and social distancing, is incredibly important.

When I began talking to people about their relationships during the pandemic, I was mainly focused on the difficulties that arose with the uneasiness of the past year and the lack of opportunities for socialization that couples now had. But after talking to Emilia, it became clear that for as many challenges that COVID posed to relationships, there were just as many benefits, too.

Emilia described this intimacy as being “private, in a nice way.” So much of romantic relationships, particularly those in college, are so heavily based on group socializing: going to a

party or having dinner with someone's roommates play a massive role in partnerships. But now that, for the most part, these activities are no longer possible, Emilia found that more of her time with Finn is spent alone together, a change which she enjoys. Though these closures have their drawbacks, they have also facilitated an external intimacy, superimposed on the very internal dynamic of a romantic relationship.

...

In my conversations with my interlocutors, all three of them—Jacob, Claire, and Emilia—remarked on the ways in which the loss of going to social occasions together, because of COVID, has altered their romantic relationships. For Jacob, this manifests itself as a lack of newness within our relationship; our own social closure that includes only each other leads to the inability to see me in different social situations and contexts, which for them means the absence of happy or interesting permutations. In Claire and Emilia's case, the dearth of gatherings isn't necessarily a bad thing. For both of them, it can actually provide their relationships with a treasured sense of closeness.

Claire's identification of the social closures between people in relationships and people who aren't in relationships was valuable information for me. Though they aren't exactly a new phenomenon, COVID greatly heightens the division between these two groups through the anxiety and unhappiness it's brought onto people. COVID has magnified so many different rifts between communities and people, particularly within small communities.

### Conclusion

Small towns, and the people who call them home, enable a passive type of social closure, dictated by their geographical boundaries. In my research with the Bard students who live in Tivoli and with the historical movements of Rockport, I note the ways that small towns enable a closeness and intimacy between residents; in these towns, the people who inhabit them are part of a community wherein values are shared. People live and work together in these communities, but even beyond that, they socialize together and often truly know each other.

But when there are schisms or adversity within these pre-set social closures, what happens? When the social closures of small towns face crises—whether that be labor conflicts, alcohol abuse, or the coronavirus—the people within them break from the larger closure and establish their own, smaller closures. These smaller factions don't all operate in the same way. Some clearly and distinctly exclude other people, some are less orderly in their exclusion. Some of these closures are designed reluctantly, informed by greater, more worldly circumstances. But within Rockport and Tivoli, although they take different shapes and operate in their own distinctive ways, they happen.

Rockport's quarry workers used two types of social closures. First, they closed ranks deliberately to oppose their bosses at the granite company. When the company's executives brought in the laborers from Boston, the strikers tried to bring them into their closure, but when this failed, they definitively shut them out from their group, too. The women of Rockport's temperance campaign established social closures against the people they knew and loved, as these people did not agree with their mission. Their willingness to break off so sharply from their families was a major part of their success: the rest of the town now took them seriously.

Within Tivoli's population of Bard students, the social closures employed were less purposeful; they had been dictated by the larger issue of COVID. What I observed in my field work was people attempting to navigate the confusing new boundaries of these closures, sometimes resisting them, and sometimes finding surprising benefits in them.

The formation of smaller social closures within larger ones when crisis occurs can provide key insight into what it means to be a part of a small community, what it means to live through incredibly challenging times, and how these difficulties can influence the ways we talk to and see one another. My theory complicates Weber's more simple definition of social closures, and asks us to think about how incredibly difficult these closures are to navigate, especially within small towns and villages.

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