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Abstract

In this paper, I use friendship and social networks as a lens to discuss the effects of neoliberalization of the university on UNC undergraduates. I conducted interviews, participatory mapping, and a new visual research method I call “friend mapping” to learn about five UNC students’ experiences with friendship, classwork, conflicting narratives, and the increasing neoliberalization of their university. Through this research, I find that it is helpful to imagine undergraduates not only as consumers of education, but also as workers and products at their universities. Understanding their position in this way, we can talk about the ways university students are exploited and the strategies they employ to survive the extractive processes of their schools. We also see that Universities seek to incorporate these strategies into a sanitized narrative which will attract new students each year, but that by sharing and listening to their own stories, students can take back control of this narrative and find points of solidarity with others workers. Finally, I will discuss the shortcomings of academic research in discussions of friendship and intimacy, and provide suggestions of how the academy might overcome these failures and gain a clearer and more complete picture of the lives of university students and people in general.
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Ch. 1: “Yes, I can drag UNC.” (Introduction)

If you open the booklet that the UNC admissions office gives to prospective students, you will find a two-page spread depicting South Building, the school’s administrative office. The spread also includes a paragraph about the university’s first student, and some inspirational writing about how far you can go after attending UNC. South Building, with its towering columns and sweeping staircase, cuts an impressive figure. The image and text paint a clear picture of what students can expect on enrolling at the university: they are joining a lineage, stretching all the way back to Hinton James, of academic excellence and school pride. Everything about the picture of South Building, from the architecture to the “UNC” banners hanging from its pediment to the Carolina Blue sky behind it, makes the observer feel like this is what college is supposed to be.

I am a senior at UNC, and I have never been inside of South Building. I wonder now if the inside of it is like the admissions building where I got the brochure, with its well-maintained carpet and oak mouldings, or if it’s more like the buildings where I have my classes, which tend to have aging tile floors and bathrooms in various states of disrepair. In fact, the picture painted by this booklet seemed on the whole incongruous with my experience at UNC. While nothing it says is a lie, exactly, the two-page “Welcome” spread evokes a stronger feeling of pride and history than anything that’s happened to me at school (including seeing the actual South Building). It’s obvious why the university would want to hint at those feelings in publications aimed at prospective students, but it felt wrong to me that UNC was producing ad copy which seemed so incongruous with actual life here.
Welcome to UNC. Though students rarely have reason to go inside of South Building, it dominates one of the main quads on campus.

I wondered whether other students felt the same way I did about this university. Was I alone in not feeling the love, or is the story UNC tells its prospective students really as false as it felt to me? I decided to take the question to my peers. In this research paper, I discuss various students’ experiences at UNC and ask how they measure up to the story the university tells about itself. And if there was such a discrepancy, did it bother other students as much as it bothered me?

I was particularly interested in students’ social experiences on campus. College is advertised to young people as “the best time of your life.” Media is saturated with images of carefree college students partying with their friends every night. Universities like UNC will advertise themselves as a place for young people to network with peers and make lifelong friends. At the same time, college is competitive, and students are pressured to give up a lot for
the sake of academic success. From staying up all night to work on projects, to refusing to miss lectures over an illness, college students tend to prioritize academics over other areas of their lives, even those arguably more important than school. I wanted to know how students navigate between the seemingly opposing pressures to sacrifice for the sake of their academics, and to have the fun, social experience that college is advertised to be. Because “the student experience” is huge and impossible to truly represent, I started out with three guiding questions to drive my research

- What does UNC leave out of the story it tells about itself and its students?
- Where and how do students make meaningful connections in a competitive university?
- What roles do friends & friendship play in students’ lives?

I talked to five students about their thoughts and feelings towards their friends, and towards UNC in general. Even in relatively short discussions, my participants talked about so many deep and complicated feelings that it’s impossible to describe all of them in this paper. Each student told not one but many stories about being in college and being at UNC. It’s obvious that UNC can’t tell all of these stories in its admissions brochure. But the university has a reason for telling the story it does. In this paper, I’ve tried my best to authentically represent my participants’ views and emotions on the various subjects we discussed, but I’m telling a particular story as well. I tried specifically to put together a narrative that UNC does not showcase, since I didn’t see much use in repeating what the university had to say. I found that it while undergraduates are often seen as consumers of education, they also fill the roles of workers and even products at their universities. Understanding their position in this way, we can talk about the ways university students are exploited and the strategies they employ to survive the
extractive processes they undergo at school. Friendship and the processes of caring for one another proved to be important strategies for students in these positions. Universities seek to incorporate these strategies into a sanitized narrative which will attract new students each year, but students also have their own stories to tell. By listening to one another’s accounts of their own lives, students can come to understand their connection to other workers around the world, and build solidarity with them.

The five students I talked to all have unique personal stories as well. It’s worthwhile to introduce them before going into detail about their analyses of the university they attend.

Amelia had just completed her junior year when I interviewed her. She is a psychology major from Wilmington, North Carolina. At the time of her interview, she had only lived on campus as a UNC student, though she was planning to move off campus for her senior year. Amelia describes herself as a member of several different social circles, mainly stemming from various Japanese culture and language classes that she took in her first year. She is also on the equestrian team at UNC, though she doesn’t usually spend time with the team outside of practice. Amelia seems to feel fairly ambivalent towards UNC as an institution. In particular, she’s frustrated with what she perceives as a lack of progressive values from UNC’s administration. In general, Amelia says that she will prioritize spending time with her friends over academic activities and homework, as she feels it’s better for her health.

Brian had just finished his first year at UNC. He comes from Asheville, North Carolina, and is double majoring in art and communication studies, with a minor in music. Brian is also a member of several extracurricular activities: he’s a photojournalist for the Daily Tar Heel; he works with a student organization which provides free English lessons to campus workers; and
he is a member of a Christian organization on campus. Brian describes a kind of culture shock in transitioning to UNC from his high school, which had a graduating class of only forty people. He’s found that his social circle at UNC is much wider, but that he feels more distant from the people he knows than he once did. He describes a large, loose network of friends, mostly individuals or small groups that he met in various classes. Most of his interactions with friends involve simply passing them on the way to class, but he does make an effort to see some of them over meals or studying. Brian likes the atmosphere of UNC, which he describes as having a strong sense of school spirit. He believes that as a whole, the student population here has struck a good balance between being an academically prestigious university and not being completely consumed by academics. When asked if he’s found that same balance in his personal life, he says that while he spends a lot of his time on academic work, he doesn’t let academics define his sense of self-worth.

Francis was a rising junior from Durham, North Carolina. She’s currently studying abroad in Israel, and so was unavailable when I called participants back in to make a second map. She’s an environmental science major. Although Frances lived on campus in her first and sophomore years, when she returns from studying abroad she’ll be living in a house off campus. She has one main group of friends: her housemates, whom she’s lived with since her first year. There are other groups of people she occasionally spends time with, but her housemates are her primary social circle. Frances is a member of a Jewish organization, but she doesn’t participate in clubs outside of that. She describes herself as having a “minimal social life.” Frances spends the majority of her time on homework. She says she would like to have more time to spend with people or join clubs, but she’s unable to because of her workload. She does enjoy taking walks,
and feels like she’s able to do that a lot at UNC, just by nature of having to walk to class. Frances distinguishes between her feelings towards college in general, and towards UNC in particular. While she enjoys the freedom offered by being in college, she feels that UNC as an institution is neglectful and puts undue pressure on its students, as well as “kind of half-assing its sustainability efforts.”

Sophia, like Amelia, had just finished her junior year when the interviews were taking place. She comes from Raleigh, North Carolina, and is double majoring in global studies and sociology. She’s also completing a minor in social and economic justice. Sophia doesn’t have one centralized group of friends; rather, she spends time with a lot of individuals or small groups. She prefers this to being in one large group, like she was in high school, because it allows her more control over whom she spends time with. Though her only extracurricular involvement is with a Muslim student group, she spends a lot of time at speaker events. In fact, she tries to go to one speaker event each week. She feels that this is the best way to take advantage of her time at UNC. Sophia met some of her friends through attending speaker events - specifically through Islamophobic or right-wing speakers that she and her friends disagreed with. She’s also made friends through classes, housing, and the local Muslim community. Sophia used to spend most of her time with her friends, but now that she’s in higher-level classes, she has to spend a lot more time on homework. However, she still tries to schedule her days so that she can spend at least some time socializing. Overall she feels happy at UNC. She feels that the student body is friendly, and the academics are rigorous. She’s also a fan of sports, so she likes being at a school with competitive sports teams.
Tiana, my final participant, is also a rising senior. She comes from Charlotte, North Carolina, and is a journalism major. There are several groups of people she spends time with; however, the group she shares with Amelia could be considered her primary friend group. Tiana met her friends in a first-year seminar about Japanese religion, and says she made friends with a number of those classmates because they would all eat dinner together after class was over. Group chats over Facebook or Groupme are a big part of how Tiana organizes her social life. She didn’t mention any club membership in her interview, but she is employed by a division of the university. Tiana feels a disconnect between her day-to-day feelings as a UNC student, and how it feels to talk about UNC to her family or other people outside the university. When she tries to think about UNC “from other people’s standpoints,” she’s proud to be a part of a prestigious university. But from day to day, she doesn’t tend to think much about being a UNC student- it’s just where she happens to be right now. Tiana spends most of her time working on academics, and finds she doesn’t usually have time to do things she would like to do. She’s interested in doing freelance web development work, or doing more off-campus activities with her friends, but there’s not enough time to do that after she and her friends all complete their schoolwork.

This project faces several drawbacks. First of all, this research was done on a fairly short timeline. Interviews were conducted mostly in May and June of 2017, leaving me only a few months to analyze data and write the paper. Research always benefits from having time to develop. Having time to talk with students over the course of their academic careers would make for a much richer version of this paper. On a similar note, there are very few participants in this project. The short timeline of this paper, and the fact that interviews were conducted over the summer rather than during the school year made it difficult to find participants, and while the
people I talked to had incredible and rich stories to tell, this project would have benefitted from simple exposure to more of those stories. Finally, my focus on students is fairly exclusive. Professors, administrators, and staff all come up briefly in terms of their effect on students, but their own subjective experiences and relationship with the university that all of these groups inhabit is not a factor in this paper. It’s my hope that future research can address similar questions to my own while talking to other university-affiliated people. Unfortunately that was simply not feasible in this project.

Despite certain drawbacks, my research presented a vibrant and emotional picture of five students’ lives as UNC students. It’s not possible to form statistically relevant generalizations from a pool of five people, especially in a student population of over 18,000 undergraduates (UNC News). Nonetheless, I was able to understand my participants’ stories as part of the broader system in which all of us live. I came to see the student experience as a complicated navigation of global capitalist forces which play out even in the most mundane actions and interactions in a student’s day.
Ch. 2: “The Readings and Stuff” (Literature Review)

This project focuses on friendship and emotional experiences among undergraduate college students. While I was unable to find other literature addressing that subject specifically, my research draws on concepts put forward by a number of geographers and other academics.

Bushin and White (2010) are the authors of “Migration politics in Ireland: exploring the impacts on young people's geographies.” Their study focused on children and teens who had migrated to Ireland. The co-authors spent time at an after-school program for migrant kids, and talked with members about how they spent holidays and what their everyday life was like, as well as observing drawings and photos that the participants used to describe their lives. Both this paper and my thesis seek to explore the ways neoliberal capitalism plays out in the everyday lives of young people. Though the participants in this study were both younger and under vastly different circumstances than my participants, all of them found themselves in a situation largely controlled by capitalist and state forces, not themselves. The kids that Bushin and White talked to navigated global institutions and borders in unique and personal ways, especially in their relationship with their home countries. Interestingly, this is one of the only studies I was able to find where friendship came into the balance. The study participants’ experience of migration was impacted by how much they were able to talk to their friends back home, or make new friends in Ireland. Like these kids, my participants found themselves living away from the place where they grew up, in a new and different social environment, learning the ropes as they went along. This isn’t to say that going to college is the same as international migration, but the points of similarity are very interesting. Finally, this paper cemented for me the importance of visual methods. Bushin and White were able to learn from their participants’ drawings and photos a lot
more than they would from interviews alone. I wanted to make sure that my research also used a variety of methods in order to get the fullest perspective possible on my participants’ experiences.

Dowling’s 2008 paper “Geographies of identity: labouring in the ‘neoliberal’ university” discusses the ways academic geographers are impacted by the increasing neoliberalization of universities. In many ways this project has similar aims to my own, though it focuses on researchers and professors rather than on undergraduates. Dowling explains the frustrations that her participants experienced in their work, as their universities increasingly demanded “quantity over quality.” Geographers also discussed the political side of their work and their relationship to activism, something often frowned on by their universities, which sought more “objective” research. Dowling explains that geographers working as collaborators felt they were breaking down the constraining structures of their universities. I have come to similar conclusions with my own participants. Collaboration is not the same thing as friendship, but one often involves the other, especially in the case of Dowling’s participants, who were actively seeking to undermine the isolating culture of their work. This paper convinces me that people involved with universities at a number of levels are experiencing similar forms of exploitation. There is a chance here for solidarity between academics and their students. This kind of solidarity between people in universities is a major area of interest in this project.

Gieseking’s 2013 paper “Where We Go from Here: The Mental Sketch Mapping Method and Its Analytic Components?” was integral in developing my research methods. Her discussion of participatory mapping method in a college context was immensely helpful when I was creating this project. In the article, Gieseking details the process of creating and analyzing
participatory maps with students and alumni at a women’s college. I knew I wanted a visual component in my research, because visual representations are deeply entwined with how UNC (and universities in general) talks about itself. I wanted participants to have a chance to represent UNC on their terms through my research. Participatory mapping as Gieseking described it seemed particularly relevant in work related to college campuses. She explains that through describing spaces where they spent their time, participants were able to create narratives about the impact of the college campus on their identity formation, specifically in terms of gender & sexuality. My thesis also deals with college students’ identity, in a way. Being a college student is an important identity category, and it’s interesting to see how this is reflected in physical space and representations of space.

The second paper that influenced my participatory mapping process was Gillman’s 2014 essay, “Conceptual Care Mapping: The Practice of Care Inside and Outside of the Home.” This piece a more emotional focus to participatory mapping, which was immensely helpful given my research emphasis on emotional experience and connection. Gillman conducted interviews and participatory maps with single mothers in a London suburb. Specifically she asked them to draw maps of their house, and explain what they did and how they felt in each room. Of specific interest to me is Gillman’s focus on care activities. She asked her participants to particularly note how they used each room to care for their children, and how that work made them feel. I’m also concerned about caregiving, though my focus is on emotional and not physical care. I like Gillman’s use of maps to discuss how certain spaces can come to have an emotional meaning. This was something I hoped to convey in my own research, though I think I was less successful than Gillman was. She chose to ask people specifically about what they do in each of the places
on the map. I chose to leave the method more open-ended, but in hindsight I think that information would have been really helpful. Gillman’s discussion of the drawbacks of participatory maps was also important. Her discussion of balancing participatory maps with narrative interviews inspired me to conduct both at once.

Hawkins et al performed a study similar to Dowling’s, but were conducting research among graduate students rather than established academics. In their 2014 paper “Lives in the Making: Power, Academia and the Everyday,” They came to similar conclusions: increased neoliberalization within universities was shaping graduate students’ understandings of their own lives, the culture they lived in, and their ability to connect with other people. Competition isolated students from one another and forced them to try and meet a white-centric, male-centric standard of an “objective” researcher. This paper brought in a racial and gendered analysis of universities that my own project unfortunately lacks. This piece confirmed for me that university students are workers in their own right. Though this is more obvious in the case of graduate than undergraduate students, this paper reinforced the potential for solidarity between different groups of people working at universities.

Hopkins (2011) also wrote about university campuses. His paper, “Towards Critical Geographies of the University Campus: Understanding the Contested Experiences of Muslim Students,” discusses the feelings and experiences of Muslim students at a British university. Of particular interest to me was the difference between Muslim students’ discussion of their experiences as inclusive & welcoming, and their descriptions of everyday events of oppression. Hopkins’ participants discussed numerous instances of Islamophobia in their everyday lives from various sectors of the student population. Yet when asked to describe the university and student
body as a whole they considered it a diverse and inclusive space. The difference between the way we see & feel things in the present, and the way we talk about them in the abstract, is of interest to me. A number of my participants experienced a disconnect between their daily lives as college students, and the way they or people around them seemed to talk about the university. I wonder if Hopkins’ participants would have vocally identified this disconnect the way mine did.

One of the most influential papers in writing my thesis was Katz’ 2001 work, “Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction.” Katz turns to social reproduction as a lens through which to view neoliberal processes. By discussing the effect of global capitalism on the way people care for each other, she is able to draw connections that she calls “contour lines” between the way global forces operate in faraway locales. My project ended up taking a similar stance, using friendships as a lens to understand capitalist relationships at UNC. Social reproduction is an important factor in my thesis, as well. The reason I chose to focus on friendship was because I was interested in the care that happens between students. Katz’ emphasis on the importance of caring relationships was affirming and inspiring, and her analysis of global capitalism through the lens of social reproduction helped me make sense of the patterns I was seeing in my own research. Finally, Katz uses “topography” as a concept to draw connections between capitalist processes in different locations. Though I’m focused on one place in the world, I loved Katz’ visual of lines connecting processes of exploitation and resistance across the globe. I think it’s useful to draw such lines between people as well as places. Conducting research through the lenses of everyday life helps us see connections between people, whether they are separated by distance, borders, class boundaries, or other global forces.
These connections are particularly important in the implications my research might have for college students’ futures.

I was only able to find one paper whose explicit purpose was to study friendship. Valentine’s 1993 work, “Desperately Seeking Susan: A Geography of Lesbian Friendships,” details lesbian social circles in Bristol. The article discusses how lesbian women meet other lesbians, where they hold social gatherings, and the impact of these friendships on their daily lives. This piece provided a helpful template for how to talk about friendship academically. Specifically, the article discussed the origins of friendship, the connections between and among friends, and the real-life impacts of friendships on the people in them. The way Valentine talked about friendships between her participants helped me understand what to look for in my own research. There are some notable similarities between Valentine’s participants and mine. Both groups are under what might be called unique circumstances in terms of who is available to them socially. Though the spatial confines of lesbian life in 1990s Bristol, and those at a university in 2017, are not the same, in both cases people are part of a predetermined group that (at least partially) defines who they make friends with. Most importantly to me, this piece was really reassuring. I was beginning to wonder if anybody at all had written about friendship. Friendship is not a well-studied phenomenon, and deserves more focus than it gets. I was glad to see that I wasn’t the only person interested in researching it.

The final piece that influenced this project was another work of Valentine’s: “The Ties That Bind: Towards Geographies of Intimacy” (2008). Valentine argues that there ought to be a new subfield in geography which spans sexuality studies, youth studies, and family studies, and focuses on intimate relationships between people. The connections that Valentine draws between
these three subfields really inspired me. In fact, this practice reminded me of Katz’ contour lines. Working on this project has made it clear to me that lines of connection can (and should!) be drawn not only between distant places, but between people in the same place and even between different parts of each person’s life. In the real world, there are no neat lines dividing people’s sexuality from their experiences of youth and family, or their friendships from their jobs, or their religious beliefs from their interactions with pop culture. Rather, a person inhabits all of these aspects of their life at once. It seems more important for research to draw connecting lines than dividing ones, and Valentine’s piece does an excellent job of that. Valentine’s emphasis on intimacy is also vital to my project. My aim is to use intimacy, particularly the intimacy between friends, as a way of understanding life at a neoliberal university. Most research of college students focuses on their individual identities or experiences. It’s helpful to have an example of research focused on the connections between people, rather than people as individuals. Finally, Valentine’s suggestion that new forms of research might be necessary to understand intimacy inspired my third research method. Valentine explains that research of intimate relationships may require new and creative methods that extend beyond narrative interviews. Drawing on this assertion, I decided to ask participants to draw maps not only of campus, but of their relationships with their friends as well. I don’t think this method perfectly encapsulates what Valentine hoped to see, but I think it’s a step in that direction.

Although I wasn’t able to find previous research about friendships on college campuses, there is a lot of insightful work about various components of my thesis which have informed this project. Each of these pieces was deeply important to the process of conducting, analyzing, and describing my own research, and this project would have been impossible without them.
Ch. 3: “Does this really have to be, like, a map?” (Methods)

My primary interaction with participants was through semi-structured interviews. I conducted five interviews in total with various UNC students. Something worth noting is that all of these students were people I already knew, with some of them counting among my close friends. My friends were more eager to participate in my research than strangers, especially since most of the interviews were conducted via video chat over the summer. But while this was initially just a logistical circumstance, it made for a really interesting research project, as people’s stories intertwined with each other and created a more complex narrative about the particular connections I observed.

My purpose in using interviews was to allow participants to talk about their lives as UNC students and give their opinions in their own words. Part of my aim was to understand participants’ trains of thought about broad topics which affect UNC students, so many questions were intentionally vague in order to encourage participants to follow their own line of thinking. For this reason, interviews varied in tone and length.

Interviews mostly lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, with one exception lasting almost an hour and a half. I divided the interview questions into three sections: questions about people’s social lives; questions about their feelings towards UNC; and questions about their use of campus spaces. I started with a base of six questions in the first section, seven in the second, and five in the third. However, because interviews were semi-structured, the conversation often veered off in unexpected directions, leading to lines of discussion not reflected in the initial set of interview questions. The majority of the discussion seemed to be concentrated in the second section of the interview, discussing people’s feelings about UNC as an institution. This could be
because of the higher number of questions, or the fact that the questions in that section were stated more vaguely. It could also be that this is a topic people think about more often and have more to say about.

I chose to organize interview questions this way because I felt that it most accurately reflected the guiding questions behind this project. Friendship, institutions, and spaces at UNC are the thematic areas most important to this study, so I wanted to make sure that interviews covered all three of these topics. Presenting the sections as distinct from each other has certain drawbacks. Most importantly, it made it more difficult to draw connections between participants’ feelings on the different subjects. However, I did find parallels and connections between different sections in the interviews.

Interviews were analyzed through language coding. I searched each transcript for certain keywords, including names of distinct places, activities people did with their friends, and emotional language. I also took note of recurring themes between different interviews, and connections between different sections of the same interview. Similarities and differences between participants’ discussions of UNC and of their friendships were of particular interest to me, especially where there were notable exceptions to a general rule.

Along with the interviews, I also asked participants to draw a map of UNC’s campus. The intention was to understand the way people think about UNC’s campus and which spaces are important to them. In Gieseking’s research with women’s college alumnae, both the details that alumnae remember and the relative size of different campus areas on their maps inform her analysis of women’s experiences at the university.
Participatory mapping has both pros and cons as a research method. In her discussion of her work with single mothers in London, Gillman points out that participatory maps may provide an oversimplified “snapshot” that doesn’t reflect the variability of people’s daily routines (Gillman). In addition, I noticed that many of my participants felt pressure to draw an “accurate” map of campus, despite my assertion that it was their perception of campus which was important. In contrast to their discussion with me during their interviews, when participants freely admitted to not knowing or remembering something, when asked to actually put their memories down on paper they felt more compelled to do it “right.” Despite these drawbacks, the maps provided useful information to the research project. Using both maps and interviews together allowed each to fill in gaps left by the other. For many of my participants, drawing maps drew their attention to places on campus that were important to them, but that they hadn’t thought to talk about in response to my interview questions. In some cases, the act of drawing and the questionable accuracy of the maps they drew made participants think about their relationship with the campus where they spend much of their time.

There were a few things I looked for when analyzing participatory maps. Most obviously, I wanted to know how each map compared to what UNC actually looks like. I was also interested in what places or types of places were depicted across different participants’ drawings. Though participants paid varying levels of attention to detail, some places, like the pit or a participant’s residence hall, were on everybody’s map. Finally, I was interested in discrepancies between places depicted on people’s maps and places they described in their interviews. Since maps were drawn during interviews, sometimes the drawing would prompt a participant to bring up a certain place, and these instances were of interest as well.
It became clear that neither interviews nor campus maps were capturing precisely the experience I wanted to understand. Valentine writes, “[quote about new forms of research pertaining to intimate relationships].” This proved to be true in my own research. Both of the methods I initially used were highly focused on individual experiences, and not necessarily meant to explore relationships. In order to explore intimate relationships, I returned to four of my participants after the beginning of the school year and asked them to draw a second map. Rather than marking down spaces, however, I asked them to visually describe their social networks.

The purpose of this exercise, which I call friendship mapping, was to make visible the connections people recognize between and among their friends, and thus to understand people’s sense of their own place within their social circles. In the same way that participants’ campus maps expanded on their discussion of spaces, their friendship maps provided a much richer framework in which to understand their social connections. The practice of naming and placing particular friends in relation to themselves and each other helped my participants open up more about what different relationships meant to them. Participants also used friendship maps to place themselves within a much broader social world than they described in their interviews.

As with the interview questions, I tried to offer only a vague description of what a friendship map should look like, in order to bring out participants’ own imaginations. However, I did provide examples of what a friendship map might look like, since the concept was new to my participants. Most participants chose to group their friends together in different lists, while one drew a sort of web where friends were placed at relative distances from himself. These choices were of as much interest to me as the actual content of the maps, as it helped me try to get inside participants’ heads and see the ways they understood themselves in a social context.
The visual distribution of friends was the primary point in my analysis of people’s friendship maps. It was interesting to see how people thought of their friends as individuals or as members of groups. I was also interested in how people depicted connections between groups of friends, or between individual friends. In her work with lesbian communities in Bristol, Valentine describes social circles as having varying “densities” as a measure of how many of one person’s friends are also friends with each other. The varying densities of my participants’ social circles was really interesting to me. Finally, something I noticed was that while drawing their friendship maps, many participants commented on the fact that they knew more people than they thought they did, even having to resort to contacts lists to make sure they wrote down the name of everyone they considered their friend. This was fascinating to me. It would seem like anyone who’s close enough to you to call your friend is somebody you would already think to write down, but this wasn’t the case for most of my participants, or even for me when I was drawing examples of friendship maps. The breadth and depth of participants’ social circles was surprising both to participants and myself.
Ch. 4: “Lenoir hides the bagels after a while.” (Findings)

Before beginning my analysis of the research I conducted, it is helpful to describe some of the more noteworthy findings from this project. In this chapter, I discuss key themes from the interviews I conducted, as well as describe and provide commentary on the campus maps and friend maps that I asked my participants to draw. Images of all the maps can be found in the appendix on page 63.

Interviews

There were a few common themes I noticed between different interviews. In particular, I was interested in how people made friends and how they spent time together. Of my five participants, the majority had made friends through their classes. Language classes in particular seemed to be a common place to meet friends. Some participants also made friends in their first-year residence halls. Koury and Hinton James were both listed as places where people made lasting friendships. I had expected initially that a lot of people would have social circles based around extracurriculars, but this was not as common as I expected. Amelia said of her equestrian team that “We do club stuff together,” but said she didn’t spend much time with them outside of practice. Brian also mentioned several clubs when describing his social life, but said that his closest friends were people he’d met through classes for his music minor. The one extracurricular that did seem to have an impact on people’s friendships was religious community. Sophia and Frances talked about making close friendships through Muslim and Jewish student groups, respectively. Some participants had also stayed close with one or more friends from high school, and Brian had actually made friends at his first-year orientation.
Friendship circles tended to become more dense over time. Amelia told me that what had in her first year been several distinct groups of friends had, over time, become one much larger group. Brian told me that several close friends of his had actually been introduced by other, mutual friends. Interestingly, I was able to watch this networking happen over the course of my research. Amelia and Tiana were both members of a group that had first met during a class in their freshman year. By the end of the research period, Sophia had joined this group and become friends with both of them.

My other area of interest was what people tended to do with their friends. A lot of participants talked about “hanging out” with their friends. This was interesting to me, because the phrase encompassed a very wide range of activities. Watching movies and having important, emotional discussions were counted under the same activity. The important thing was that it was time spent with friends - what they actually did together was secondary. All five of my participants talked about eating together with friends. In fact this was one of the only things that was brought up across the board by all of my participants. Tiana and Amelia explained that their shared group coalesced because they would all eat dinner together after their class. Brian told me that eating lunch with people was one of the only ways he had found to spend quality time with people in college. Frances referenced regular dinner dates with a group of friends as one of the few social activities that got her out of her room. Sophia talked about how much her experience in college improved after she made a point of eating with people rather than alone. Eating seemed to provide an opportunity to spend time with people when my participants were otherwise too busy. It’s easier to put homework on hold for dinner than to just put it off to hang out. Going out and going to parties was another activity that a majority of participants referenced.
Amelia and Tiana both explained that they had a specific group of friends that they liked to go out with, as a subset of their social circles as a whole. Frances said that she would occasionally go out with her housemates, though she didn’t particularly enjoy it. She told me that this was one of the few things to do around Chapel Hill, especially on the weekends. For these three participants, parties seemed to fall in a similar category to meals in that they were a valid reason to spend time with friends. Other activities people talked about were running into people by chance and, in one case, attending speaker events. A few participants talked about wanting to take advantage of the number of events held on campus, but only Sophia actually went to very many of them. In fact for her, this was how she met one of her closest friends.

Another thing people wanted to do but, by and large, did not, was leave campus. Tiana talked about wishing she were able to spend time off campus and out of Chapel Hill with her friends, but explained that transporting a large group of people was too difficult to do it very often. She said this was more a question of transportation than of time. Frances also wanted to go on more “adventures” with her friends, specifically talking about wanting to spend an entire day with friends rather than just a few hours. She told me that she’d recently gone on a road trip with two of her housemates. Though they had lived together since their first year, Frances felt that being in such a different situation together had made them closer. Both Frances and Tiana wanted to have more opportunities like this, but felt that their situations as UNC students prevented this.

*Campus Maps*

Amelia’s map is relatively sparse. On it she includes the arboretum, the horse farm, her dorm, her friends’ dorm, the dining hall, a parking lot, and the campus health building, which she
draws quite large. I was curious as to why is campus health so big on the map. She said she goes there pretty often, but the building is larger both than her dorm and the arboretum. One possible explanation is that the building is not just large in her imagination but also imposing. Going to campus health means that Amelia is hurt, and it also means she has to talk to doctors and other strangers. At the same time, in her interview she was rather dismissive of campus health as an institution. The importance she gave the building on her map seems at odds with her description of it. Tellingly, Lenoir is right in the middle of her map. Lenoir seems to be something of a centerpoint for students who live on campus. Not only is it physically between most dorm buildings and most class buildings, but it fulfils a very important role for students with limited kitchen access. The centrality of the dining hall in people’s visualizations of campus, and the centrality of food in their physical and social lives, go hand in hand.

Another important thing Amelia included on her map was the arboretum. This was not unique to her; in fact, the arboretum seems to occupy an ambivalent space in multiple students’ minds. Amelia and Brian both talked about how they like the arboretum, but never go there. Sophia put the arboretum on her map, but didn’t talk about it at all. Honestly it’s the same thing for me. The arboretum is one of my favorite places on campus, but I don’t go there unless I can walk through it on the way to class or the package center.

The most detailed map belongs to Brian. He wanted to be sure that his placement and scale were relatively accurate. His map is the only one which extends onto a second piece of paper. Brian made an effort to draw and label all the buildings he could remember, even ones where he spent little to no time. His map features a lot of detail from south campus (where he lived) to the pit, including most of the south campus residence halls, the football stadium, the
business school, and the Dean Dome. However, detail is lost on Polk Place and McCorkle place. He includes several class buildings, as well as South Building, the flagpole, and Wilson library, but many of the buildings near Polk Place are not present on the map. Detail gets sparser still on McCorkle place, which features only the Old Well and Graham Memorial. He also includes the FedEx building and the bell tower. Off campus locations on Brian’s map include Franklin Street, leading to Carrboro, and the Daily Tar Heel office on Rosemary Street, where Brian works as a photojournalist. Though he was attempting to make an “accurate” map of campus rather than one which reflected his personal use of space, the latter still comes out in this drawing. The path Brian walked from his residence hall Craige North to his various classes and his work is obvious in where the detail is on the map. Brian spent a lot of time on South Campus, though not necessarily in each building there. He also seems to have spent time around the pit, though not in the Undergraduate Library, which is missing, and in a smattering of classrooms around Polk Place, which he refers to as the lower quad. McCorkle Place is devoid of detail, save for Graham Memorial, which houses the honors office. This would have been important to Brian, who applied to join the honors college in the second semester of his freshman year. Also missing are the dorms along Stadium Drive, the arboretum (which Brian likes a lot but where he rarely goes), and the buildings near Genome, which is itself present, though slightly out of place. Anything east of Davis Library, such as Cobb where a number of my participants live, is also out of the map.

The biggest area of Frances’ map is the quad, with several unnamed buildings scattered around it. While she was drawing the map she told me that she knew there were two quads, but she was going to combine them in her drawing because she could never tell the difference. She
also labels Morrison, her residence hall, and specifically her bed; Ram’s Head dining hall; the pit; Lenoir; the building where she works; Franklin Street; and, in “faraway Carrboro,” Weaver Street Market. Weaver Street is depicted as a sun because she really likes spending time there. She also drew two paths: one leading from Morrison ot Ram’s Head, and one from Morrison to her work and the quad. The path leading to work also passes the Genome Sciences building, which is not labeled, but is drawn as “shiny,” which is how she referred to the building in her interview. Finally, Frances includes a small house off to one side of her drawing, near Franklin Street. I’m not sure what this is supposed to represent, but it may be the house she was planning to live in during her junior year. The particular details Frances chose to include create an interesting depiction of life on campus. She chose buildings that mattered to her and in which she spent a lot of time, but she also included markers that visually stood out to her, such as Genome. It’s interesting that the combined quads take up so much space for Frances. She says in her interview that she enjoys walking around, so it’s likely that this is why she devoted so much map space to outdoor areas. She is also one of only two participants to include off-campus locations in her map. In an earlier version of this project, people who lived off campus included a number of locations around Chapel Hill, to the point where campus itself was sometimes relegated to a small section of the page. However, all of my current participants had only lived on campus when they were interviewed, and so dedicated much more space and detail to UNC. Though Frances talks about how much she loves Weaver Street, she’s actually placed it incorrectly: to the east of campus rather than the west. She explained to me that she isn’t able to go there as often as she would like, but sees it as an emotionally important place nonetheless - not unlike other students’ descriptions of the UNC arboretum.
Sophia’s map is second only to Brian’s in detail. She doesn’t include every building, but she does put in roads and has the different structures placed fairly accurately in relation to each other. She’s the only person who didn’t include a dining hall on her map. That’s interesting, considering how important it is to her to eat with friends. She said she usually eats at the bottom of Lenoir rather than the top, which may be a factor. The bottom of Lenoir is more like a food court than a cafeteria. You can buy food there and eat it somewhere else, rather than swiping into the dining hall and having to stay there while you eat. In my experience, bottom of Lenoir provides a service, while top of Lenoir is a place you go. Sophia also included all three of the libraries on the main part of campus. She told me in her interview that “libraries are a huge part of my UNC experience,” but she also said that the Undergraduate Library is the only one where she spends a significant amount of time.

Perhaps most interesting on Sophia’s map is her inclusion of various monuments on McCorkle Place. She is the only one of my participants to include Silent Sam in her map - of particular note as she drew the map before the most recent wave of campus discussion around the Confederate statue kicked off - as well as the large obelisk, and a specific bench on the southeast side of McCorkle Place. She also included the Old Well and Graham Memorial, and the Arboretum. Like all my participants, she drew her then-residence hall, Kenan, and the two buildings surrounding it. Finally, she chose to include the bell tower on her map. Out of all my participants, Sophia was the most focused on monuments and visual landmarks. I wonder what made her think about those in particular. Part of the reason could be that I made a mistake during her interview and didn’t give her the more detailed instructions regarding the campus maps until
later, but I still wouldn’t have expected her to mark out almost as many monuments as she did buildings.

Tiana has the simplest map of all my participants. She didn’t want to do any drawing, and I had to prod her to draw anything rather than just list buildings where she goes. She included Lenoir - again in the center of the page, and it’s also the largest building on this map. It’s also underlined. Then there’s the Union and the UL, Carroll Hall, Rams Dining Hall, and Cobb, where she lives. The orientation of the map is very off. I wonder if there’s any significance to that?? Like, if you think that she meant to draw it from a northward orientation, then the union, UL, Cobb, and Carroll are all pretty much opposite of where they’re supposed to be - only Rams head is vaguely in the right direction. I live that all of the other buildings have a path connecting them to Lenoir. I guess that can say something about how Tiana divides up her day? Like, I think a lot of students probably structure their days as what they do between mealtimes. So in general it makes sense that Tiana would pass through the dining hall most of the time when she moves from one place to another. She explained to me that she spends almost all her time in Carroll nowadays, so her life is kind of just bouncing back and forth between Carroll and Cobb, with trips to Lenoir in between. It’s interesting that there’s no direct path between any other buildings, though, just paths from other places to Lenoir.

All of my participants are perfectly able to navigate campus, but their visualizations of UNC offered a stunning variety. While some participants attempted to represent campus as accurately as possible, others chose to only draw the places that were important to them. But all of them revealed fascinating insights about where they spent their time at UNC. Tiana, for example, drew her daily walk from Cobb to Carroll - two buildings not represented on Brian’s
map at all. On the other hand, Brian draws the path from his dorm on south campus to the main quad, but presents it in the context of a larger, more general map. While Brian’s drawing represents a mental picture of campus, Tiana’s represents a daily habit. What leads Brian, and other detailed mappers like Sophia, to develop these images while people like Tiana and Amelia draw more vague, personal representations of their daily movements? Is Brian, an art major, simply a more visual thinker? Does he pay more attention to campus because it is newer to him? (This seems unlikely, as Sophia’s map was also more detailed, and she is a senior - though she did not include a plethora of buildings where she didn’t go, as Brian did). Did Tiana’s hesitance to draw lead to a misrepresentation of a mental image just as detailed as Brian’s? Despite their different approaches, each participant drew a picture of a rich and deeply rooted life on UNC’s campus.

*Friend Maps*

Amelia divides her friends into eight groups: her friends from Japanese class, Viper (aka The Five), Team Friend, The Rebellion, her friends from Wilmington, her family, Equestrian team, and her friends from NC State. She listed the friends in each group in a different color. If one person was in multiple groups, she put their initials in each list, and connected them with a red line. The smallest group was The Rebellion, with only three members besides Amelia. The largest was Team Friend, with sixteen. She listed 71 friends in total. Amelia is the only person who included her family on her friend map. In a number of cases participants seemed uncertain about who they were allowed to include: Sophia asked if it was okay to include UNC alumni, and Brian asked me whether his high school friends who didn’t attend UNC were relevant to my project. I told both him and Amelia that I was most interested in the friends they had made at
UNC, but that they were welcome to include anyone who seemed important. Brian chose to only list people he’d met in college, while Amelia decided to include her family and friends at another university as well. There was high density within each group, as the members of each group all knew each other. There was notable overlap between groups, as well. Most people on the map were in only one list. However, six people spanned two groups, two people were in three groups. One person, SS, managed to appear in four groups: Japanese class, The Five (which, for the record, had nine people not including Amelia), Team Friend, and The Rebellion. These four all shared other members, as well. Equestrian team, Amelia’s Wilmington friends, and her NC State friends also had people in common. However, there was no overlap between the latter three groups and the first four, and nobody from Amelia’s family was counted in any other group. Amelia said that in general she tended to be closer with people in multiple groups, as she saw them more often. This didn’t always hold true. She explained that she didn’t have a “best-best friend,” but her oldest friend, SP, is listed only among her Wilmington friends. She told me that a number of people she was living with in her senior year were also in only one group. It’s interesting that Amelia was able to distinguish a number of distinct friend groups. In her interview, she had told me that her social circles had become much denser over time, and the lines between them had blurred or in some cases disappeared entirely. While drawing her friend map, she told me that her list divisions came mostly from the various group chats she was a part of on Facebook.

Brian’s friend map is unique. Most of my participants’ friend maps involved writing out different lists of friends divided up by group, but Brian chose to draw a complex web of his friends as individuals. In three cases he drew a circle around a group of people, indicating that all
of them knew each other through a student organization. He also organized his friends by how well he knew them, with those he was closer to being placed closer to his own initials. He also drew lines between friends of his who knew each other, and arrows from one friend to another that they had introduced him to. Brian decided to include “everyone I know more than the first name of,” and eventually had to resort to his phone contacts to ensure that he had included everyone. He wrote in pencil the initials of the people he could remember off the top of his head, and used red pen for people he had to use his phone to remember. There were 49 names in pencil and 37 names in red ink. This is 86 people in total, far more than anybody else wrote down. This is consistent with what Brian said in his interview, that he found himself known a lot more people in college, but not necessarily being very close with them. Brian’s map also displays less density than those of the other participants, especially Amelia and Tiana, for whom every friend knows several other friends. Most people on Brian’s map are connected to at least one other person, but connections are limited. Besides the groups of student organizations, the most connected person on the map is EG, one of Brian’s closest friends, who has six connections besides Brian. Most people are connected to one, two, or three other people. There are nine people with no connections on the map, seven of whom are in red. These people also tend to be further from the center. It makes sense that Brian has fewer friends in common with people he’s not as close to in the first place. Nonetheless, the lack of density on Brian’s map compared to the others is noteworthy. It’s possible that Brian’s friend map will grow smaller and denser as his time at UNC continues. This would be consistent with what Amelia said about her friends getting to know each other over time. It’s also possible that Brian’s definition of “friend,” which is different from the others’ definitions, will mean that his circle will get wider over time. Both of
these could happen at once, with Brian adding new, less-connected friends to the fringes of his circle, while those already in the middle become more connected amongst each other. This would be consistent with the story of Team Friend, the group that Amelia, Tiana, and now Sophia all share.

Sophia had a kind of hybrid method for her friend map: she created four lists, two of them referencing where she had met people, and two referencing how close she was with them. If one friend had introduced her to another friend, she drew a blue arrow pointing from the introducer to the introducee. She also drew purple lines connecting people who were in the same friend group. Sophia met five friends through the Muslim Student Association and three through the local mosque. She listed five people in her group of “close friends,” and seven in her group of “friends.” There were five total groups connected by purple lines, with two to five people in each group. There are four blue arrows, three of which initiate with Sophia’s boyfriend, whom she chose to count among her close friends. She was unsure about the placement of her previous roommate N. Though she included N in the Muslim Student Association group, Sophia said that she could also have been included as a close friend or even placed in her own category because they lived together for three years. She explained to me that she had known the people in MSA longer than most of her “close friends,” but felt there was a “different dynamic” between those groups. Specifically, most of her MSA friends she saw less often and only at club events. Rather than counting close friends as people she had known the longest, she chose to group them by “the amount of times I see them… and also the level of information they know about me.” With twenty people in total, Sophia’s is the smallest of the friendship maps my participants drew. It’s also the least dense after Brian, including five people with no connections. Considering Sophia’s
preference for spending time one-on-one or in small groups, this makes sense. Her two largest friend groups comprise five people each: one group of people from MSA and the local mosque, and one group including her boyfriend and the people they would eat dinner with each week (most of whom he introduced her to).

Tiana’s friend map is similar to Amelia’s, in that she divides her 57 friends into different lists based on where she sees them. Her lists, too, are partly determined by Facebook group chats. Team Friend is also included in Tiana’s friend map, but interestingly, she doesn’t feel that Amelia has spent enough time with that group recently to count as a member anymore. Tiana also lists friends from high school people she knows through her job, friends in her major, and one friend she made in a group called CFA. Within her major, she distinguishes between her “core group” of friends, four people marked with stars, and the other four people in her concentration. She has two groups that she names after one or more of their members: “S & co.,” and “Twins + R.” She also has two people listed under “other,” who don’t fit into any of the groups she listed. There is little crossover between the different groups, with two exceptions: the Twins + R form the subset of Tiana’s high school friends with whom she spends the most time, and S & co. is made up largely, though not entirely, of people in Team Friend. It also includes Amelia, which is not surprising, since the person she named the group after is also the person who appeared in four of Amelia’s friend groups.

After looking at the examples I provided, Tiana also wrote down where she spends time with the different groups she’s a part of. She sees Team Friend mostly in Cobb, which is her residence hall, and at Lenoir dining hall, as well as on Franklin Street when they go out to eat there. The Twins + R she sees in the dining hall, the study rooms in the basement of Cobb, in
another residence hall Kenan, and in R’s car. She sees her CFA friend at the student union, and her work friends, predictably, she sees at work. Scottie & co. are the people she goes to parties with, so she sees them mainly in their dorms and at fraternity houses. She spends time with her friends from her major in Carroll Hall, which houses the Journalism school.
Ch. 5: “They’ve already decided whose opinions they’re going to listen to.” (Analysis of exploitation, subversion, and the struggle for narrative control)

Even having spoken with only five students, there was a lot to dissect from my participants’ discussion of their lives as UNC students. There’s no easy way to synthesize the complexity of five whole people’s lives into one paper. The people I talked to are connected by their location and their common goal of graduating from UNC. Some of them are friends with each other and share much more than those two things. Even so, each of them is a unique person with their own takes on life and friendship. To try and simplify this into a few easy points seems like not only an impossible task, but a stupid one. The points I’ve summarized below are not a comprehensive representation of what I learned from my participants. Nonetheless, I believe I managed to find some very important points that showed up for many of my participants. Here’s what I learned:

- Though students are thought of only as consumers at their universities, they are also workers and even products.
- Students are often asked to put aside their human needs in favor of academic achievement. Nonetheless, students maintain their humanity by caring for and receiving care from their friends.
- Some students see their relationships with their friends in opposition to their relationship with the university.
- In many ways, the university relies on the student workforce to renew itself, both through emotionally caring for each other, and through creating a culture that draws in a new class of students each year.
Students create their own narratives about UNC outside of this framework of advertising and workforce renewal.

Universities are generally considered to be as far from factories as it’s possible to be. But often they function in similar ways. I recently had a conversation with two of my friends about our frustration with trying to learn new skills at UNC. My friends were interested in working to learn new skills or subjects, but because poor performance would hurt their GPA, neither of them felt comfortable taking classes in subjects where they didn’t already have at least some expertise. Students feel that the products they create, in the form of papers, projects, and tests, are more important to the university than their own learning process- the reason they wanted to attend college in the first place. This feeling of being pressured to only pursue what they already now doesn’t fit the way most people imagine college students, as young people looking to expand their horizon and learn new things. Instead, my friends are akin to factory workers. Their creative process, or what they learn by creating something, is secondary to the product. My participants held varying views on how important academics were to them, yet all of them spent the vast majority of their time doing homework, often to the detriment of other activities they wanted to do. Sometimes this included actual learning. Frances told me about several cases in which she enrolled in what sounded like an interesting class, only to find that “It just ended up being the same discussion over and over.” Tiana talked about wanting to do freelance work as a web designer, or learn new coding systems on her own time, but neither of these were possible because of her class workload. Students are constantly creating academic products for the university, in the form of papers, art projects, completed tests, and presentations.
Papers are not the only products in higher education. In fact, it can be argued that students themselves are the products from which the university hopes to profit. Alumni are of tremendous import to universities, both as donors and as a part of the university’s reputation. UNC has a vested interest in ensuring that its alumni population is rich and famous enough to fill both roles. As with the production of academic papers, the creation of wealthy, well-known alumni takes precedence over the actual learning that happens at the university. Frances talks about how “top notch people get produced from this school,” and when asked to discuss her feelings about being a UNC student, she told me she was afraid that she would not be one of those top-notch people. She asked me, “What if I’m just an average person being produced by this school, that’s just gonna end up being some HR lady in a cubicle?”

While students occupy positions as workers and as products, they are generally painted as consumers. Margaret Spellings, the current president of the UNC system, went so far as to talk about students as “customers” in a public statement (Cravey & Siegel). At one point, Brian mentioned to me that he had never skipped class, even when he was sick. When I asked why he chose to attend class rather than rest, he explained, “I’m here to learn.” Brian thought of himself as a consumer of education, and it would he didn’t want to give up the product he was buying because of illness. But this is not the only way university students talk about learning. Frances also told me she was “here to learn,” but she said this in reference to her frustration with classes that she found boring or repetitive. It was also the complaint that my friends had about the grading system. Whether students see themselves as consumers, workers, or products, their ability and process of learning is the centerpoint of their relationship with the university. Learning is a thing that students-as-consumers buy from UNC. It is also a thing that
students-as-workers do for UNC, or struggle to do despite UNC. And it’s the thing that UNC uses to make students into valuable products.

Frances says that UNC appeals to “all the top-of-their-class high schoolers who think they’re hot shit… Literally everyone was the standout at their high school” (Frances). Hawkins et al find that graduate students also struggle with this concept, saying that “I don’t like the rising stars shit, I hate the idea that some of us are rising stars. I don’t think anybody is a star only because they get more grants” (Hawkins et al 336). The idea that in order to be truly successful, a student must not only be good, but also be better than their peers, is pervasive in university spaces. Frances went on, “I feel like when [UNC] was advertised to me, they said, ‘You can do anything you want. The world is your oyster’... You just end up being another person in a 30,000 person school.” She worries that if she is unable to be “the standout,” it will make her education less valuable. In this anxiety you can see the way that students’ positions as consumers, workers, and products all feed into each other. As a consumer, Frances wants her education to be valuable. In order for her education to be valuable, she herself must become a valuable person. In order to become a valuable person, she has to produce valuable academic work. Particularly insidious in this cycle is the fact that UNC can then take the work that Frances does and show it to another set of high schoolers who think they’re hot shit, using the value that Frances creates as proof that the education that they offer is valuable. More ways that the university benefits from student labor will be discussed later in this chapter.

At no point has UNC, through its administrative representatives or its advertising materials, specifically asked students to forsake their health or their social lives for schoolwork. But it’s understood that this is what students need to do. At my first-year orientation, incoming
students were shown a video of a “dance party” held in the Undergraduate Library during finals season. For fifteen minutes, the library played music and students got up and danced around, then everybody went back to studying. It was definitely after midnight when this happened. Putting aside how annoying it would be to suddenly have loud music playing while you were trying to study, the video made it clear that being in the library at 2 am, instead of being in your bed, was something to expect at UNC. It was even supposed to be fun. This instance is indicative of the culture that UNC fosters among its students, a culture where students are implicitly expected to put their own needs aside. This culture is supported by the requirements placed on professors to have certain numbers of papers, projects, and tests. Most of my participants reported that classes were more demanding than they felt was reasonable. At the same time, many participants felt like they weren’t working hard enough. Frances explains that she often feels guilty spending time with her friends, because “No matter how much homework I’ve done... I always feel behind” (Frances). This was another attitude shared by Hawkins et al’s participants, who seemed to feel both that their research and teaching requirements didn’t leave enough time for the rest of their lives, they also felt that they needed to work harder to meet those requirements (Hawkins et al 336).

Imagine the university as a factory helps us discuss the extractive processes it engages in with respect to its students. Students often feel emotionally and physically drained by their course loads. Tiana explains, “By the time I’m done with work, I’m tired, and I just want to sleep or lay in bed. So then I don’t end up doing real things” (Tiana). In her case, “real things” meant spending time with her friends or learning new coding skills. In Hawkins et al’s study, graduate students also found themselves putting off “real things” like buying property or getting married
(Hawkins et al 339). Their day-to-day lives as well as their broader timelines were consumed by work, much like my own participants. Particularly noteworthy in Tiana’s discussion is her point that she is too tired to spend time with her friends, even when she is done with work. For Tiana as well as other students, spending time with friends helps her to restore her energy after feeling drained by her academic work. Yet she is so exhausted by this work that she finds herself unable to take on that restoration. Being drained beyond the point of repair is not a situation unique to university students. In fact it happens all over the world, to people, forests, air, and any number of systems impacted by neoliberal capitalism.

Katz talks about drawing contour lines connecting similar processes in different places affected by neoliberal exploitation. In examining the impact of neoliberalization on university students’ daily lives, we can draw such lines between undergraduate and graduate students; between students and other workers; and between human workers and nonhuman beings that are also being drained and exploited. Katz uses a slightly different lens to make connections like these. Rather than talk about the daily lives of individuals, she focuses on social reproduction, or the interpersonal work that goes into renewing the labor force. Feminist scholars discuss two modes of reproduction: the raising of a new generation, who will become workers in the future; and the caretaking that allows the current labor force to return to work each day. Historically, the west has relegated both of these activities to the home, and specifically to women who stay at home. The gendered division of labor - public production by men, and private reproduction by women - has been the subject of feminist scholarship for decades.

At universities, the stark divide of public production and private reproduction is broken down. For college students, especially those students who live on campus, there is a very blurred
line between public and private space. A college student might sleep, eat, have class, go to work, and meet their friends all in a very small area, along with thousands of other people doing the same thing. Furthermore, a lot of caretaking is provided for students by university workers. For students living on campus, dining hall and housekeeping staff take care of cooking and cleaning, two of the major factors of daily social reproduction. The work performed by university staff, who are often underpaid immigrant women, is vital to university students and worthy of study. However, this project focuses on the relationships students have with each other.

Emotional caretaking is another part of social reproduction. Like other workers under capitalism, university students perform emotionally exhausting work and need outlets for that distress. In western tradition, both emotional and physical caretaking is provided by wives and mothers, who are typically not present at universities. Workers are paid to care for students physically, but emotionally students tend to turn to each other. All of my participants, even one who felt he didn’t have many close friends at UNC, talked about the importance of social connections for their health. Amelia even goes so far as to say that she considers her friendships more important than her academics (though the majority of her time is still spent on homework). She admits that without her friends around, her grades would probably be better. But because of the toll it would take on her happiness, she considers it “Not a good exchange” (Amelia).

Many students feel caught in a tug-of-war between their social and academic lives. While most of my participants would list studying together as something they did with their friends, there was still significant tension between time spent with friends and time spent on academic work. This was also reflected in the maps that my participants drew. Several of them included the arboretum, despite spending relatively little time there. Though their academics left them
relatively little time to enjoy this space, it was still important to them. The same can be said of “faraway Carrboro” on Frances’ map, and especially her representation of Weaver Street as the sun. Places that were away from campus or otherwise removed from schoolwork were places where students could rest and recover from the demands the university made of them. Places like this were important because they allowed students to reassert their own humanity. For Frances, being UNC meant being “at the hands of a very large force that I am not in control of” (Frances). Leaving campus and spending time with her friends meant slipping out from that force’s control and asserting some of her own autonomy. The positives in her life, both geographical and social, were antithetical to her relationship with UNC.

Perhaps more interesting are the parallel ways in which students talk about their friends and the way they talk about their university. When asked about her feelings towards the university, Amelia explained that she didn’t feel the university administration listened to students. She thinks that many administrators, who are at UNC much longer than students are, don’t feel a need to change their beliefs or policies, because any student who is angry at them will be gone in a few years anyway. This is especially true in terms of politically charged school policies, such as when student activists worked to change the name of Saunders Hall to Carolina Hall. On the other hand, listening is very important between Amelia and her friends, and enables Amelia’s own political consciousness. She explains, “I usually don’t think to follow the politics and the bureaucracy… But I definitely listen when other people bring it up and talk about it, and I’m like, ‘Wow, that’s a real issue, I can’t believe I didn’t know about that!’” (Amelia). The way Amelia listens to her friends is a stark contrast to the way UNC administrators fail to listen to students. Both listening and not listening are political acts. Amelia describes UNC administrators
as not listening because they already have political power; meanwhile, students build political power and awareness when they listen to each other.

In *The Ties That Bind*, Valentine argues that we should not just study people, but study *between* people. The thin lines tying us together are more interesting to Valentine than each of us on our own. Amelia leverages these connecting lines against the exploitation that she faces at the hands of the university. Similarly, Sophia joins forces with her friends to find the strength to confront racist and Islamophobic speakers brought to the university. In Dowling’s study, geographers were able to use academic collaboration as a tool to combat the intense pressure put on them by their institutions. These geographers turn on its head the conflict that graduate students saw between competition and collaboration: instead of the competition involved in academic life limiting their collaborative abilities, they use collaboration to reject the idea that their jobs are inherently competitive. For these geographers, as well as for Amelia and Sophia, power is built in the spaces between people. Listening to, caring about, and collaborating with each other are all ways of creating power that doesn’t come from exploitative institutions.

Tiana and Frances both saw their friendships as simultaneously inherent to their lives as college students, and antithetical to their experiences at UNC. Tiana explains that “My friends are really what makes my Carolina experience, because so many of the memories that I have of Carolina revolve around my friends… You can get good academics at any college, I think. But I could never get this certain mix of people that I have anywhere else” (Tiana). Although academic requirements take up most of her time, the parts of UNC that make Tiana happy to be there have nothing to do with academics. Frances, meanwhile, actively distances discussion of her social life from any discussion of UNC. Like Tiana, she has “Memories of UNC, but they’re not
memories of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It’s memories of friendship that happened at UNC” (Frances). In fact, Frances takes this distinction a step further, stating that there is a difference between how she feels as a college student generally and how she feels as a UNC student specifically. For her, being a college student means “Being away from home and being with your peers constantly… It’s liberating” (Frances). Meanwhile, Frances’ experience as a UNC student has meant dealing with bureaucracy, a social and institutional focus on sports that she doesn’t share, and frustration with underwhelming classes. In short: for Frances, college means autonomy, but UNC means being controlled. It’s in her friendships, both with other UNC students and students at NCSU, that Frances finds the autonomy she craves. For both Frances and Tiana, friendship offers a way of taking back control from the university which dictates so much of their lives. The experiences that they have and, most importantly, that they remember, gives them autonomy over their own narrative. Control over narratives of student life is important to the university, as we saw from the admissions material UNC offers. Yet friendship is powerful enough for students to wrest back that control, at least in their own memories.

UNC is not going to give up narrative control quite so easily. The university is able to incorporate student strategies for surviving exploitation, and use them for its own gain. As stated above, there are two types of social reproduction: daily reproduction of the existing workforce, and the creation of a new generation of workers. At a university, the latter process occurs on a shortened time scale, as an incoming class of first-years must replace graduating seniors every year. Recruitment and advertising are extremely important to universities for this reason, and one of the main points that UNC draws on in recruitment is student life. Clubs, sports teams, basically any kind of “culture” that takes place at the university can be used in this way. UNC
depends on students to do the majority of this work. While the university can put up funds and offer spaces, it is student labor which goes into planning and executing almost every event that makes UNC attractive to prospective students. It’s worth noting that nonstudent labor goes into many of these events as well - spaces are cleaned by house- and groundskeeping staff; tents might be erected by private sector employees; catering might be provided by local restaurant employees. A huge amount of the work of maintaining a university comes from people who may never reap the benefits that that university advertises to prospective students. As with the daily reproduction of current students, the next “generation” of student laborers is brought in by the work of underpaid staff, along with free student labor. Events which student organizations - arts and cultural organizations especially - put huge amounts of work into putting on become advertising points for UNC. Currently, if you click the “Prospective Students” link on UNC’s website, you will find a background photo of a performance by Bhangra Elite, an Indian dance organization created by UNC students. Creating and maintaining student arts organizations, not to mention choreographing, rehearsing, and putting on large-scale performances, can be exhausting work. While I don’t know any members of Bhangra Elite, I know that dance team members and captains spend hours every week working to make their groups performance-ready. It seems unfair that work which takes up so much of students’ time becomes essentially free advertising for UNC.

Even as the university depends on students to create culture that the university can then advertise, bureaucratic structures and policies make it even more difficult for those organizations to do their work. Brian experienced this first hand when he became the president of CLaP, a student organization which provides free English lessons to UNC staff. Brian explains that he
decided to take on the presidency after his first year, but quickly realized that keeping the club going was an overwhelming task. When I met with him for a follow-up interview in his sophomore year, he told me that the process of renewing CLaP’s student organization status had been complicated, and he’d received little help from the student union. In the end he was unable to keep the organization’s official status, though he hopes to renew it next year after training a new organization president. “I’d rather focus on teaching than bureaucracy,” he told me (Brian b). It seems particularly insidious that this organization faced so much difficulty at the hands of UNC bureaucracy, given the university’s history of undermining solidarity between students and workers.

Historically, students have found and lost solidarity with other workers on UNC’s campus. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the first Lenoir Foodworkers’ Strike, which occurred in March of 1969. Staff at Lenoir dining hall, with support from UNC’s Black Student Movement, went on strike to lobby for increased wages, overtime pay, and the appointment of a Black supervisor. Throughout the process, UNC administrators attempted to undermine the alliance between the workers and the BSM: they refused to meet with workers when BSM members were present; they closed the dining hall and attempted to oust the BSM from their headquarters in Manning Hall; and shortly after the strike ended, they turned control of the dining halls over to SAGA, a private company which ensured that the demands nominally met by the governor never actually came to fruition (I Raised My Hand to Volunteer). UNC’s administration knew, like Amelia knows, that power is built between people who care about each other and work in solidarity. Breaking apart that solidarity became the university’s primary mission in a time of unrest.
One outcome of the Foodworkers’ Strike was the creation of the UNC Non-Academic Employees Union, one of several workers’ unions that have come and gone in the history of the university (*I Raised My Hand to Volunteer*). Though this union no longer exists, a new iteration of union activism at UNC has begun during the time this paper was written. The Workers Union at UNC, a branch of UE 150, is a collaborative effort between graduate students and campus workers. The union is already fighting an uphill battle, due to North Carolina’s status as a right-to-work state, and its restrictions on collective bargaining power for public employees. In the coming months and years, the union and the university will have to contend with each other. It’s likely that the university will attempt once again to disrupt this burgeoning solidarity between students and other workers. It will be worth keeping watch over what strategies each organization adopts. How UNC will attempt to undermine the union, and how union members and other workers respond, will undoubtedly give us new insight into how interpersonal connections can build power, and how that power might be overridden or subsumed. It is my hope that this paper will provide a lens through which to view these struggles, and perhaps even offer insight that will be helpful to graduate, undergraduate, and nonstudent workers trying to maintain solidarity with each other.

Even student labor which is directly opposed to UNC administrators and policies becomes advertising for the university. In the 2014-2015 school year, a group of students called the Real Silent Sam Coalition fought for the renaming of the building then known as Saunders Hall. William Saunders, the building’s namesake, was a Jim Crow-era white supremacist and a leader of the North Carolina KKK. These were not the first students to fight for the hall’s renaming. In fact, this battle had been going on for decades, with the Real Silent Sam Coalition
fading in and out of activity for about ten years. The university tried to discredit the claim that Saunders was a violent racist, calling him an alleged KKK member and implying that the Coalition were jumping to conclusions. Coalition members dug through UNC’s archives to find irrefutable proof that Saunders was not only a KKK leader, but that this was one of the reasons the 1922 Board of Trustees chose to name a building after him. At the same time, the Coalition staged disruptive protests against Saunders Hall, including one rally where Black students stood on the steps of the building with nooses around their necks. After months of fighting, wherein UNC administrators and Trustees harassed coalition members and student reporters sympathetic to their cause, the Coalition experienced a partial victory. In the summer of 2015, the Board of Trustees voted to rename the building. However, rather than name it after Zora Neale Hurston, who attended UNC classes in secret while the university was still segregated, the Board chose to give the building the politically neutral name “Carolina Hall.” They also enacted a sixteen-year moratorium on renaming any other buildings on campus - meaning the student body will have cycled through four completely different groups of students before there is a chance of renaming Aycock Hall or the Carr Building, or any other UNC building named after a violent white supremacist.

This is not the story that UNC tells about the building that I and a dwindling number of other students still know as Hurston Hall. Walking down Polk Place (another part of UNC that deserves renaming), you will see a number of flyers hanging from light posts advertising the “Carolina Hall Story” that you can view in the entrance of the building. This exhibit teaches us all about the Board of Trustees’ racist history with regards to Hurston Hall- and all but leaves out the vital student activism that led to the name actually being changed. If you go to
www.carolinahallstory.unc.edu, you can read about how the Real Silent Sam Coalition “petitioned” the Board of Trustees, who then did their own research rather than trying to suppress and then being forced to acknowledge the truth. In this sanitized version of the story, the Board of Trustees are made out to be heroes for acknowledging their own racism, and the Real Silent Sam Coalition are turned into helpful students who worked with the university, rather than having to struggle against them every step of the way. The grueling battle against their own administration, which left students exhausted and disillusioned, was somehow turned around to serve as more advertising for the university that made those students’ lives so miserable.
Two sides of the story. Top: an email sent from Chuck Duckett, then a Trustee of UNC-Chapel Hill, to a student reporter about her Daily Tar Heel article. Image downloaded from the Real Silent Sam Coalition Facebook page. Bottom: the sanitized story told about the Coalition’s so-called petition regarding Hurston Hall. Screenshot taken from the Carolina Hall Story website.

CONFRONTING OUR HISTORY

Students had voiced concerns about Saunders Hall as far back as 1975, but found little support. That changed in 2014, when a number of campus organizations – including the Black Student Movement, Real Silent Sam Coalition, and Campus Y – brought together students, alumni, faculty, staff, and local townspeople to petition the trustees to take down Saunders’ name. The various groups also organized teach-ins, rallies, and social media campaigns that connected UNC’s past to contemporary issues of equity, justice, and inclusivity.

“We cannot stand idly by as our history goes unquestioned, and as our silence serves as a blaring memorial to the wrongdoings of our past. We have a responsibility to our peers and ourselves to not only unveil, but confront the past we have inherited.” – Real Silent Sam Coalition
UNC’s admissions website contains a list of “traditions at Carolina,” which includes everything from Holi Moli, a holiday event hosted by UNC’s Hindu student group, to the act of buying dessert at the local frozen yogurt shop (Office of Undergraduate Admissions). Everything students do, whether it’s a cultural event that they work hard to put on, an extended campaign against university administrators or policy, or even the simple act of getting something to eat, is somehow turned into advertising. At a neoliberal university, students are mined academically for all they are worth, and then whatever they do to get through this exploitation is turned around and mined all over again. They are able to find power in their connections to other people, but in some cases even that power is then taken and used to the university’s benefit. It seems that if students are caught in a tug-of-war between their academics, their extracurriculars, and their social lives, the university wins no matter how the conflict is resolved.

UNC is adept at using students’ experiences and activities to create a narrative that will attract a new student workforce. But this narrative isn’t the only one out there. Students have their own stories about their university, as do staff and faculty members. The maps my participants drew tell a much different story about UNC. Tiana’s campus map tells us about the restrictions UNC puts on her time and movement. Frances’ depiction of her daily life on campus speaks to her love of being a college student, and despair at being controlled by UNC. Friend maps, too, tell a story about this university. Brian’s map paints a picture of UNC that speaks to his experience of suddenly finding himself in a much larger, more impersonal context than his high school. These stories contest the advertising narrative that UNC is a friendly community where student success comes first. The stories my participants tell about the connections they have made here are different from both of these. The increasing density and overlap on Sophia,
Tiana, and Amelia’s friend maps weave a narrative about people coming together and finding solidarity. These stories all contradict each other as much as they complement each other, and this only makes them stronger. There is no one story about UNC, or about any part of anybody’s life.

Amelia told me in her interview about the power that comes from listening to one another. UNC has a large audience for its narrative, but that doesn’t mean that this narrative is the only one with power. Sharing our multitude of stories allows university students, along with other exploited workers around the world, to build power among ourselves. The more we listen to each other, the easier it becomes to draw the lines that connect us to one another.
Ch. 6: “You should send me your thesis when you’re done. It is a thesis, right?”

(Reflections on academia and intimacy)

Looking back on this project, I found my methods to be insufficient for what I was trying to create. What I really wanted to get at was the relationships between people, but my research methods focused on individual experiences more than interpersonal relationships. I attempted to move closer to where I wanted to go by asking people to draw maps of their friendships, but that method is still centered on individuals (literally, in Brian’s case). This seems to be a problem with research in the humanities in general. As Valentine points out, research tends to focus either on individual experiences, or on generalizations made about whole communities (Valentine 2008). Rarely do we talk about relationships between pairs or small groups of people.

Geographic research seems to have two settings. Either we are extremely “zoomed in” on our individual participants, to the point where we are essentially writing a biography, or we’re so “zoomed out” that we can hardly see individual people at all. Perhaps we just haven’t found the right research methods, but I’m increasingly convinced over time that the problem is the dynamic of academia as a whole. Ultimately, the point of research is to take something in the world and render it legible to a particular worldview. It relies heavily on quantification and classification, and intimate bonds between people resist both of those methods of understanding. We can talk about density, but numbers and percentages can’t encapsulate what those relationships actually look like. We can talk about friendship as a means of survival, but that doesn’t really explain how it feels to see your best friend after turning in a draining project or finishing a difficult test. Making someone’s life legible to academia means losing a lot in translation, and that’s especially true when interpersonal relationships enter the picture.
Gillman discusses this to some extent in her work on conceptual care mapping. She explains that asking her participants to draw a “snapshot” of their lives was an oversimplification of their experience (Gillman 2014). Her recommendation is to use interviews alongside mapping to provide a more complete picture, but when talking about relationships, this isn’t enough. People talked about their relationships to their friends in the interviews I conducted with them, but they only talked about them in a generalized, “zoomed-out” sense. In some ways, it was nice to zoom out through the interviews and especially through the friend maps. My participants had fun making them, and I had fun watching them. But this only worked because we already knew each other. I was able to understand the nuances that were implicit in my participants’ maps because they were already my friends, not because of the maps themselves.

There is something of a movement within qualitative research for a more intimate knowledge of one’s research subjects. Participant observation and ethnographic work helps researchers zoom in more than they would be able to using other methods. But even when you know your participants well, is there really a way to encapsulate that in an academic paper? My experience with this project says no.

Ultimately I think the problem is that research is its own form of exploitation. At the end of the day, I’m doing the same thing I’m criticizing UNC for: I’m taking the stories my participants have to tell, and using them to tell my own story. I’m doing it with permission, and I like to think I pay a little more attention to what they actually want than UNC does (the part of this paper that I’m the most proud of is how excited Tiana is about it), but I am still using these people’s lives to tell my own story and advance my own goals. I really do believe that telling our
stories builds power, and that connecting with one another through sharing and listening is important. What I’m not convinced about is whether academic research is the way to go about it.

Something I’ve struggled with over the course of this project is engaging more with other scholarship in this area. It’s important to hear what other people have to say about your topic and avoid reinventing the wheel, so to speak. At the same time, though, I’m less interested in what other scholars had to say than in what my actual participants had to say. If I’m trying to write about people’s lives, I would rather spend more time elevating their voices rather than talking about something that’s already been published. Frankly, academics talk to themselves enough already.

You know in elementary school when three of your so-called friends would form a “secret club” that they wouldn’t let you join, and use it as an excuse to exclude you during recess while they talked about you behind your back? That’s academia. Academic journals use paywalls and peer review as tactics to keep out the majority of the people they talk about. If I were to submit this paper to a journal, it would undergo peer review. But the people reviewing it would not be my peers. Other undergraduates - the people this paper is actually about - are my peers, and the undergraduates I’ve talked to about this project are really excited about it. But the approval of other undergraduates or even the approval of my participants wouldn’t matter. What I would need in order to get this published would be the approval of a group of academic geographers who don’t know me or my participants at all. It’s not that those people wouldn’t have valuable things to say, but it is deeply troubling to me that their advice is deemed more important than that of the people who actually contributed to this project. Personally, I am more interested in whether they feel I represented them well than in whether this piece contributes
something to the body of academic literature. Because the body of academic literature on college
students or on friendship or on anything else discussed in this paper is and has only ever been for
academics. This paper was created by college students; it should be for college students. I don’t
care if this project is legible to the academy. I care if it makes sense and feels accurate to the
actual people who had a hand in making it.

Drawing friendship maps was worthwhile because my participants had fun doing it, but I
don’t think that it makes a significant contribution to academic discussions of friendship or other
intimate relationships. In The Ties That Bind, Valentine calls for more research about intimacy,
but I think that these kinds of relationships simply exist outside the purview of the academy.
When attempting to categorize or quantify intimate human relationships, so much is lost in
translation that you’re no longer talking about the same thing. Friendship is vexing to the
academy, and to global capitalism in general, because it can’t be used for extraction or given a
value. UNC can talk about social activities in order to attract new students, and it can extract
more from people who have friends to rely on. But the bond between friends is not itself
comprehensible to the academy, to UNC as an institution, or to capitalist logic.

New research methods will not be sufficient to make friendship a legible academic
discussion. If the whole point of the academy is to create an in-group which can then take
information from the out-group (anyone without a Ph.D and university-supported access to
academic journals) and talk about it amongst themselves, then genuine human connection is
never going to be up for discussion. Graduate students and professional geographers lament how
hard it is to collaborate, but it’s obvious why this should be so once you realize that people
actually genuinely liking and talking to each other is completely outside of the academic model.
In neoliberal academia, someone is always taking something from someone else. There is a hierarchy that goes from research participants to researchers to peer review boards to “the academic community.” But there is no hierarchy in friendship. Intimacy is a two-way street. To extend the metaphor, the mean girls in elementary school were never your real friends, and neither is there room for real friendship under an academic lens. In order to be made coherent to the academy, people’s lives and friendships must be abstracted and generalized to the point where they are completely incoherent to anybody else.

Valentine argues that new methods of research will be necessary in order to talk about intimate relationships, but this assertion doesn’t go far enough. The nature of academia itself needs to be the first thing to change. Research as a whole needs to stop speaking a secret language that only academics can understand. Academia needs to become a space where people learn together, rather than simply taking knowledge from somebody else. Finding new research methods is only one part of that. Both UNC specifically and the academy in general are extractive machines. Until this reality changes, they will always be battling for control over people’s stories about their lives. In order to respond to Valentine’s challenge, academics need to do more than change their research methods; they have to change the entire institution that supports their livelihood.
Ch. 7: “What change would you want to see?” (Conclusion)

In this paper, I have discussed different narratives about life at UNC, especially the interactions of students’ narratives with that put forth by the university itself. There are vast differences between the stories that students tell about their lives, and the story that UNC tells about student life. While students are often seen as consumers on college campuses, they also inhabit the positions of worker and product. Looking at student life through the lens of friendship and other social activities lets us understand the ways the university mines its students for both academic and nonacademic products. I also learned that students’ strategies for surviving in such a competitive university are themselves commodified in order to reproduce UNC’s student workforce. Despite this dynamic, many students continue to view their friendships as outside of or oppositional to their exploitative relationships with the university. Finally, I discussed the difficulties with describing intimate relationships such as friendships within the confines of academic writing, and outlined the far-reaching changes that need to be made within academia as a whole if the field is to make space for serious discussions of intimacy.

In any work of academic research, a primary question that ought to be at the front of the researcher’s mind is, Why does this matter? Learning about students’ lives can certainly be interesting, but what are the material consequences of my observations, and what is the impact of this discussion?

The main objective in this project was to talk about universities from a student perspective. Focusing on students as workers and products at universities, rather than as consumers, differentiates this project from most other works in this field. Other projects discuss the neoliberalization of universities around the world, as well as the impacts of these processes
on professional academics and on graduate students. However, undergraduates remain underrepresented in this discussion. When people do write about undergraduate students, they are discussed as consumers rather than workers. It’s my hope that this project empowers university students to discuss their own experiences at college, both in terms of the exploitation they face and their strategies for counteracting it. Importantly, my discussion of undergraduates’ positions in a neoliberal university stresses the points of similarity between them and other workers. If this paper helps students identify points of solidarity or “contour lines” connecting them to other workers at their universities and around the world, then it will be worth all the stress and sleepless nights it took me to write it.

It was also important to me to focus on the emotional bonds that students form at university. As seen in Valentine (2008) and Katz’s papers, emotional bonds and social reproduction provide an important and unique lens through which to understand capitalist processes of extraction. In addition to describing university students’ position as workers, it’s also important to describe them as people who care for and about one another. Our emotional ties to the people around us form another sort of contour line. Identifying points of similarity and solidarity is important, but it is caring about each other that keeps people together. Understanding how, when, and why we matter to each other is a starting point for expanding our feelings of care and connectedness beyond what can be exploited by neoliberal institutions.

Third, I wanted to be sure to discuss the shortcomings of academic research as a whole in regards to friendship and other intimate relationships. The research process itself is extractive in a similar way to other capitalist institutions, so research is unable to really describe non-exploitative relationships such as friendship. It’s important to discuss the shortcomings of
academia, especially in an academic paper. Self-criticism is an area in which we could all use more practice. I have done my best to discuss the ways in which this project in particular, and the academy as a whole, have let down my research participants, as well as outline some of the changes which are necessary to fix these shortcomings.

The final question that must be asked is, *What comes next?* What do we do with the insights gained in a research project? What new questions does it raise?

There are numerous ways this project could be expanded, but one that is especially interesting to me is expanding questions of emotional experiences at universities to staff as well as students. University workers of all types are relatively anonymous in the academic world. (Could it be that academic writers and professors are simply so used to university environments that they don’t realize it’s worth studying?) Nonetheless, staff members are integral both to the function of the university as a whole and in the lives of students, especially those living on campus. Having learned something about the way students care for each other emotionally, it makes sense to focus now on the people who are paid to provide for them physically. Perhaps more importantly, in identifying students as workers, this paper has made clear the potential for solidarity between students and other workers at their schools. It’s important to understand now how such solidarity might be enacted - or, possibly, is already being enacted. The new workers’ union at UNC is one example of this. What’s the role of emotional ties in the history of workers’ movements at UNC? What new insights can be found that can help student/worker solidarity remain sustainable? In what ways do students and workers care about each other, and how does that inform their interactions with the university where they all work?
Finally, this project outlines the need for a deep-seated change in the function and purpose of academia itself. As long as academics continue to talk back and forth among themselves with no input or criticism from the outside, academia will become more and more obscure and, frankly, useless. If geographers wish to ensure that their work can actually be of use to people, then they need to pull their field down from the ivory tower. When knowledge creation is no longer a secret club for the rich and the university-educated, then perhaps it will find the language to talk about intimacy.

Valentine calls for broader research on “the ties that bind,” the emotional connections that hold us all together. These ties don’t exist in a vacuum. They are formed, examined, exploited, broken, and formed again in a global system which increasingly values competitive individualism over care and mutual aid. Understanding these ties from the perspective of people who form them - which we all do - helps us strengthen them in ways that are more difficult to exploit. University students’ personhood is called into question by the exploitation they face at their schools. Often, the work they do to reestablish personhood is once again exploited for advertising. Yet students are still people. Students, along with other workers the world over, continue to find ways to care for and about each other in the face of exploitation and enforced competition. Feeling compassion and love for one another is not going to solve all of our problems. But I believe it’s a pretty good start.
Appendix

Campus maps

Amelia’s campus map
Brian’s campus map
Frances’ campus map
Sophia’s campus map
Tiana’s campus map
**Friend Maps**

Amelia’s friend map

Brian’s friend map
Works Cited and Consulted


