Everyday Courage

Way, Niobe

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WITH HER HAIR pulled tight into a barrette behind her head, Eva, a strikingly beautiful black adolescent girl with clear, soft skin and an athletic body, walks into our interviewing room in the spring of her sophomore year. She is going to be interviewed for the first time by Helena. Unlike many of her peers, Eva does not appear awkward or nervous as she confidently collapses into the chair and waits for Helena to turn on the tape recorder.¹

Born in Trinidad, Eva has spent most of her life living with her aunt and uncle in the United States. She presently lives with her mother, who moved to the United States from Trinidad a few years ago. Eva explains to Helena that she only recently decided to move in with her mother because she wanted to get to know her younger sisters better (both of whom live with her mother down the street). She also thought that her aunt was favoring her own daughter over Eva. Eva’s father had moved to the United States when she was young, but at that time Eva chose to stay with her aunt and uncle because she didn’t feel close enough to her father to live with him. Eva’s father currently lives nearby and they see each other frequently. She has seven brothers and sisters (two more siblings, one of whom was her twin sister, died when they were babies). She says she has many half-brothers and sisters (“so many, I don’t know”) because her father has had
numerous girlfriends. Her mother isn’t steadily employed but occasionally tailors clothes, and her father works as a manager of a local sandwich and bakery shop. Eva says that she receives no financial support from her parents and works to earn all her spending money.

Eva’s Sophomore Year

Helena begins her sophomore-year interview by asking Eva about her relationship with her mother:

_How would you describe your relationship with your mother?_

Down the tubes, I don’t get along with her at all. Not— nope—I don’t get along with her. It’s not that I haven’t tried. I put my 50 percent in. We don’t get along.

_Why not?_

I don’t know. We just don’t get along. She don’t like me. I can’t say I hate her, because I don’t hate her. I just can’t—I just don’t like her.

Her mother, Eva says, continually “picks” on her about her late hours and her frequent absences from home. Eva explains that she and her mother argue so much because they did not live together when she was younger and, consequently, they are just now getting to know each other. In this brief assessment of why she and her mother do not get along, Eva reveals what will be a pattern throughout all of her interviews. Eva consistently suggests that she understands not only the nuances of her relationships, but also the relational nature of her difficulties. She is angry at her mother but blames neither her mother nor herself for their problems. Instead, she understands their problems as a product of their past and current relationship.

She and her father, Eva says, get along “great”:

Like we talk about things. Like, you know, when I’m staying with my mother and we’re having conflicts and he always gets involved, because my mother makes him get involved. She would, like, say [to him], “You need to talk to her because when I talk to her, nuthin’ gets through to her,” . . . so he tries to talk to me and when he talks to me we have an open mind. I listen to his side and he listens to mine. And the reasons I did whatever I did, you know, and I like that.
Eva appreciates the mutual respect and openness in her relationship with her father. Her father’s respect for her is revealed, she says, in his ability to admit to her when he is wrong, which her mother does not do. Eva does not feel respected by her mother:

I believe in you give a little respect, you get some back. That’s the problem these days in the world, grown-ups like they think children should respect them but they don’t show any type of respect in return. What comes around goes around, no matter how old you are or how young you are.

And my mother don’t seem to understand that . . . like she said, “Two grown-ups don’t live under the same roof, so one got to go. That’s it.”

*So she said that to you about you?*

Yeah. I’m going to go.

While Eva claims that she is planning to leave her mother’s house, when pressed by Helena she admits that she will probably not move out because she does not truly believe that her mother wants her to leave. She adds that her father would be angry with her if she left her mother’s house: “My father was like, ‘Where you going? . . . You’re not leaving, you’re staying right there, you are not going away,’ so I stayed.” Eva has chosen not to live with her father because she enjoys her sisters’ and brothers’ company at her mother’s house and thinks that she would be lonely in her father’s “huge house.” Eva appears conflicted about but, nonetheless, committed to living with her mother.

Eva gets along with some of her brothers and sisters. Her closest relationship is with her ten-year-old sister: “[It’s] the goodest relationship I ever had . . . she understands me.” Her twelve-year-old sister, she says, wants to “be like me . . . she plays basketball and tries to do everything I do, has the same type of clothes and stuff.” Her mother considers Eva to be a bad influence on her younger sister because her sister gets suspended from school just as frequently as Eva did when she was younger. She strongly resents being blamed for her sister’s troubles.

Tamara, Eva’s best friend, attends the same school and is in the same grade as Eva. She is her best friend “[c]ause when I’m having problems I talk to her, I go over her house, we cook food together . . . and we do a lot of things together.” Some of their shared activities include community service and going to a local college Upward Bound program. Eva attrib-
utes her success in school to her best friend’s encouragement. Her friendship with Tamara remains an important relationship for Eva throughout her high school years.

Eva had a boyfriend a few months ago with whom she broke up because he cheated on her. At first, she did not want to believe her peers’ reports of her boyfriend’s infidelity but gradually came to realize that they were “speaking the truth.” “I overlooked what people said; I trusted in him and I found the truth, so trust really works, if you believe in it.” Strikingly, Eva explains that her trust in her boyfriend eventually led her to see that he was not telling the truth.

Eva says she had sex with this ex-boyfriend because “I loved him, and at that time I thought he loved me, so I thought it was right, so I did it.” Although she continued to go out with him, she stopped having sex with him when she found out he was lying to her about “certain things” (before she realized he was also cheating). I suspect that Eva may have difficulties taking care of herself in her relationships with boys. Although she ultimately ended this particular relationship, she did so only after repeated experiences of her boyfriend’s “lying” and “cheating” and after her friends consistently told her about his bad behavior.

When Helena queries Eva more on the topic of sex, Eva begins to reveal her ability to speak her mind:

*What was it like for you to do it and then to stop?*

For me to stop? No, I don’t think you should—that question should be asked because it’s not as though I’m doing it like it’s a job. If it’s love, it happens, it just happens, it’s not something you plan, like the theory about on your honeymoon, you’re supposed to, you know, have sex or whatever. I don’t believe in that, and I’m not going to follow that.

Unlike her peers in the study who only conveyed their dislike of particular questions indirectly, Eva directly expresses her concern with Helena’s question (although she attempts to soften the critique by shifting from the active to the passive voice). It becomes increasingly evident that Eva often speaks her mind not only in her interviews, but also in her relationships with friends, family members, and, by her senior year, with her boyfriend. Eva is firm in her views and in her refusal to follow rules and conventions
of behavior in which she does not believe (“I don’t believe in that, and I’m not going to follow that”).

Currently, she would like her friend Deshawn to be her boyfriend, but she says that they do not want to “rush into anything.” “I think that’s good because you have to be friends before you be anything else.” Eva sounds more interested in having a romantic relationship with Deshawn, however, than he is in having one with her: “He’s not my boyfriend, but I think of him as my boyfriend, but he’s not.” Eva considers her relationship with Deshawn the most important relationship in her life:

You say you look up to him. Why is that?

The way—he has this amazing way of going about things he’s really into. For a teenager, you know, he doesn’t let himself get into anything that he can’t handle himself and he’s just so intelligent. He’s real smart, and I like that in a guy. Like, you know, the things teenagers do, they get drunk and all that. He is a peer counselor, so, therefore, he’s not into all that. And so that’s why I admire him.

Eva was one of the few adolescents who identified peers as the people for whom she holds the greatest esteem. She mentions her particular regard and respect for at least one of her peers each year she is interviewed.

Describing herself, Eva says: “I have a lot of potential, I’m very active, a lot of potential and I know I’m smart. Smart and competitive—competitive. And I’m very trusting—trusting and loyal, you know. I’m real, yeah.” She likes herself and explicitly recognizes her strengths:

I’m not like normal people. If you see a pencil—if you put this pencil on the table, you’ll see a pencil and accept it. I’ll go around and say, “Yeah, I see a pencil, but why is the pencil there and who put it there.” Most people would just see a pencil: “So what, a pencil,” like that. That’s how I go about solving problems, too. You know, that’s it.

Eva is intensely proud of her curiosity and her ability to ask questions. Each year during her interview, she describes herself as smart, competitive, and curious about her world. Her pride in her curiosity was unique among the adolescents. Eva considers asking questions and trying to get beneath the surface an essential part of her approach to the world.
She also thinks it is good not to be “normal” because “I think if I’m doing something positive and using that in a positive way, then it’s good.”

You feel different from other people?

Very, ’cause it seems like most people today all want to do what other people want to do. If a whole bunch of friends said, “Yeah, we’re going to the movies this weekend,” and I really didn’t want to go, I wouldn’t just say, “Yeah, I’m going to be with them and not really enjoy myself.” I would say, “No, I’m going to the library and reading up on my culture,” you know. And that’s like, I just like to be like that. If I don’t want to do something, I don’t do it. I don’t like to be pushed or pressured into doing anything.

Distinguishing herself from her peers, Eva boasts of her nonconforming behavior and of her independent mind. She resists peer pressure although she does not resist, as evidenced in her discussion of her best friend and role model, being influenced by the attitudes, goals, and actions of her close friends.

When Helena asks her about current drug or alcohol use, Eva says that while she has smoked cigarettes in the past, she currently smokes neither cigarettes nor marijuana and only occasionally drinks alcohol:

Why do you not drink alcohol more?

’Cause great things are expected of me, not just from—I’m not saying as family-wise, because they don’t really know what I’m capable of doing, because they never take the time to notice. But you know, I’m an athlete and your coach wants you to do it. When I did that [got drunk at a party], my coach and my teachers and my friends were really disappointed in me. And I was kind of disappointed at myself, but I think that one time because I was having a problem with something. Let me stress this, I didn’t do it because my friends were doing it. Like I said before, if I say no, I mean no and no means no. I just did it just to do it. I stopped.

Eva’s confidence and pride in her independent mind are evident in this passage as she tries to convince Helena that she thinks for herself. When Helena asks why she does not use drugs, she says, “If I don’t like some-
thing, I don’t continue doing it.” Eva repeatedly insists that she is not one who follows the crowd. She is willing to admit her own vulnerability (“I was kind of disappointed at myself . . . I was having problems”), but is also adamant about being perceived as an independent, strong, and proud young woman.

Eva is getting B’s in school in her sophomore year. She believes she is capable of higher grades because “school is easy if you put your mind to it. The work, it’s not hard, but, I play around a lot. I may sound serious, but I still have fun, hanging around a lot.” Eva was doing considerably worse in middle school and in her freshman year in high school. She began to do well when she took up basketball. In fact, she says, the required grade point average to play basketball is what first motivated her to do well. As a result of basketball, she eventually made the honor roll:

The team always competes for honor roll. Me and my friend Tamara, we always competed: “Oh I bet you will get the honor roll,” or, “I’ll get the honor roll this term and you won’t.” You know, betting on it and things like that. I know it sounds nutty, but we do it.

Notably, Eva seeks to excel in school not only because it is demanded of her but also because her friend challenges her.

Since she entered high school, Eva has begun looking at education in a different way:

*What do you mean when you say you look at education in a different way?*

Before, you just go to school to get out of your parents’ way, get a little free time, and now, now I love school now. But I hated school [in middle school]. Now I love school, and if we have a school vacation, I’ll drive by the school—

*Really?—*

—like once a week.

*What is it that you love about school?*

Maybe it’s because of my friends, even though I can still see them, but my friends, and the teachers are good. It’s not that hard. I think it’s not hard.

Since Eva receives a great deal of support (from coaches, teachers, and friends) at her school and is doing well as a student and as an athlete, it should not be surprising that she “loves” school. I am nonetheless sur-
prised at her absolute and unequivocal affirmation of her school—the same one that I perceive having so many problems.

_Do you think that how you do as a student will have an effect on your future life?_

Of course. Yeah, if I work now and in my college years and do what I have to do, then later on in life I won’t have to struggle and work so hard. I can just relax, you know. Be, not wealthy, because I don’t think money—money’s not important, but I’m saying, it’s inside the head, understanding things. So if I work now and do what I have to do, like they say, like your mother says, “You do your chores, and then you get to go out.” You know, do it, get it over with, and life is easy, you relax. You won’t have to be thinking about retirement when you’re eighty, you can be thinking about retirement when you’re younger.

Although Eva describes her family as “very poor,” she does not place much value on the accumulation of wealth. She has a larger vision about her future, which includes getting an education, learning, and working hard. Like so many adolescents in this study, Eva believes that working hard early in her life will inevitably reap positive outcomes, but her personal twist is that knowledge counts above all. “Understanding things,” working hard, and “relaxing” are her future goals.

Eva would like to attend a predominantly black college and, after graduation, become an actress and an owner of a clothing boutique:

_When you think about the future, what do you think of?_

Me. [Laughs.] I think of me, and my friend Tamara, my best friend Tamara, owning a business right next to one another—right next to one another and competing like we always plan. I’ll have a store right here and she’ll have a store right there. I think she’s going to have a hair dressing store, while I have a fashion store, and after work we’ll go and work out and then go take our acting class, like that.

_What is it about competing?_

Me and her, I don’t know, I like it.

_What do you like about it?_

The satisfaction, I don’t know. I just like it, not winning or losing, well, I do like to win. I try my hardest to win, but you know, I don’t take losing as
As we have heard before, Eva enjoys competing with others, especially with her best friend, Tamara, with whom she imagines a lively and interconnected future. Competing is not only a source of enjoyment for her now, but is a key element in her image of her future. For Eva, competition does not exclude cooperation, encouragement, or affection.

When asked what she hopes for in the future, Eva says: “I’m not so much as into looking for marriage or anything. I want to be a working woman. And later on in the future I hope to have one child, maybe two, a boy and a girl.” While it is not clear how Eva understands the association between marriage and working, it is clear that marriage is neither a primary nor a particularly attractive goal for her and is not linked to having children. The girls in the study typically conveyed such beliefs: they wanted to have children but were ambivalent about getting married. Marriage was perceived as risky and potentially confining, whereas rearing children was typically considered joyous for the most part. Their beliefs about marriage were most likely a reflection of those held by their mothers, many of whom were single and raising children on their own.

When Helena asks about any possible fears or apprehensions about the future, Eva says:

The future, yeah. I think a lot [about my fears of the future] during class. I’m thinking about that, about all the killings and bad things and I’m afraid that, you know, all these young kids not knowing what they’re able to do. Their lives being taken away. I think about all that gang violence down here, the drugs.

**So you are afraid of those things, what those things can do?**

I’m not really afraid of it, because I think if you know about something, you can’t really—you can’t be afraid of it. I’m not afraid of it, like drugs, I’m not afraid of drugs. Drugs can’t do nuthin’ to me. Only I can do something to me, you know. And guns, guns don’t kill people, people kill people, so I’m really thinking about the people.

By reframing Helena’s questions (“What those things can do. . . Drugs can’t do nuthin’ to me. Only I can do . . .”), Eva suggests, once again, the
importance of individual responsibility. She believes she is entirely responsible for what she does to her body. Her emphasis on independent thinking and action, heard repeatedly among her peers when they spoke about their futures, school, and the issue of discrimination, underscores the extent to which she has been influenced by mainstream values and the advertising that promotes them (“guns don’t kill . . .”).

Eva, however, is also deeply embedded in her relationships:

**What makes your life worth living?**

I’m happy that I’m living because my grandmother, I love her dearly. There’s Tamara, my little brothers and sister, even though I am going to say this, because it’s true, even though I try to deny it, but I know deep down, I do love my mother, Deshawn, all my friends, my father, really.

Eva expresses her feelings of love even for those with whom she is in constant conflict. Although she believes that her friends and her coach support her more than her family (“family-wise . . . they don’t really know what I’m capable of doing because they never take the time to notice”), Eva has strong attachments to her family.

In this sophomore-year interview, Eva appears self-confident, highly articulate, critical, intellectually independent, and deeply connected to her peers. She believes that she will accomplish what she wants in the future. Each year, most of these themes become stronger and more pronounced for Eva (although her self-confidence seems to decrease slightly in her junior year). While listening to her, it remains unclear for me how Eva is able to hold a job during the summer, participate in sports, get good grades, and have numerous friends when she experiences little support from her mother at home. Her admission that she loves her mother “deep down” even though she does not “like her” leads me to suspect that her mother may provide more support than she is willing to admit. Her peers, teachers, and coaches, however, may also furnish her with enough support to thrive even with her difficulties at home.

### Eva’s Junior Year

This year, Eva starts off the interview with Helena saying that although she still lives with her mother, she “really” has three homes—her mother’s, her
father’s, and her aunt and uncle’s: “When I’m having problems at one place, I just go to the other house.” Most of the time, however, Eva lives with her mother.

When asked what changes have occurred with her mother since last year, Eva says she is more independent this year because her “mother trusts [her] more.” However, when Helena asks her directly to describe their relationship, Eva tells a slightly different story:

Same as it was before. . . . You know, I go home, do my homework. Go in my room. Then leave.

*And then leave? Where do you go?*

To the park or to the library. Nothing bad. But she always thinks I’m going out somewhere bad or hanging out on the street.

Although, according to Eva, her relationship with her mother has improved since last year, there is “still not much said” nor is there evidence of increased trust between her and her mother. The source of her mother’s mistrust is unclear throughout her interviews.

Eva says she still has a good relationship with her father because she believes that he “understands” her more than her mother.

My mother always thinks that I’m doing bad stuff. My father doesn’t think that. You know, I bring [athletic] trophies and stuff home and I show ’em to my mother, and she just looks at them, “Oh, yeah.” And if I show my father he’d be like, “Oh, that’s good.” He starts encouraging me to do better and stuff.

It becomes more evident in this junior-year interview that Eva receives consistent support not only from friends, teachers, and coaches, but also from her father. Her resilience and self-confidence are clearly a result, at least in part, of this strong support network. People are drawn to her and want to encourage and support her because, perhaps, she is successful and determined. In turn, she is able to flourish.

Eva reports “okay” relationships with her siblings, particularly her older sister and her eleven-year-old sister. The only sibling with whom she actively struggles is her fourteen-year-old sister. Their difficulties stem from her sister’s borrowing habits and her “lack of respect” for Eva’s belongings. Eva tries to complain to her mother but to no avail; indeed, she
says, she rarely feels supported by her mother when she is angry with her sisters.

Eva, once again, states that her friend Tamara is not only her best friend but also the person whom she most admires (along with Langston Hughes). She credits Tamara entirely for her self-confidence and improved school performance this year:

Is there anyone in your life that you’re looking up to?

That I look up to? Yeah, my best friend, Tamara. I’ve always looked up to her and then, there’s like I’m interested in poetry. I write a lot of poetry. And I like a lot of black poets, like Langston Hughes. Like in my freshman year, I used to be like an average student—a “C” student. And then I felt good about myself. I don’t know, I think I got it from my friend Tamara. She encouraged me. And like this year I’m doing real good. And getting honors and stuff. I don’t know, I think it was really her . . . [Tamara] would always compete with me like, you know, “Oh, I bet you can’t do it.” It wasn’t in the negative stuff. Like she used be like, “I bet you can’t get the honor roll before I do.” And we used to be bad, okay, like in my freshman year, we used to get C’s and D’s and F’s and always be missing school and all that. And all of a sudden, she’s all like, “Yeah, forget that. We better start doing this instead of playing around.”

The encouragement, competition, and inspiration from Tamara, whom she identifies along with another close friend, Caroline, as her most important relationships, makes Eva feel “good about [herself]” and motivates her to work hard in school. Discussions of best friends, or even same-aged peers, being role models and most important relationships were rare among the adolescents in the study. Role models were typically either unknown figures in the media or adult relatives, and most important relationships were typically mothers. The lack of support Eva experiences at home may be one reason why her friends fill such roles.

Eva believes that she and her best friend, Tamara, are both “very open and have high goals” for themselves. She appreciates that she and Tamara are so ambitious and very committed to school. (With clear pride in her voice, Eva tells Helena that she missed no more than two days out of the entire school year.) She also likes the fact that her friend is not “normal”: 
“If you really talk to her and understand her, she’s just not normal. And I don’t like to be normal either. I like to be different.”

Eva sees herself as “more different,” however, than her friend:

The way we go about solving problems. Like if you see something here. Let’s say a glass was broken on this table: she would look at it and she’d be like, “Oh, so what. A glass is broken.” Whereas, as I would look at it and I’d be like, “Why is it broken? What happened to make this glass break.” Or you know the reasons for that. She’s like, “It’s just a broken glass. Dag, leave it alone. Sweep it up. Throw it away.” And I would look into why it got broken, who broke it, and why they touched it. Oh, like that.

In another intriguing description about her approach to life, Eva uses a metaphor of a broken glass to describe her active curiosity. Like a detective or a scientist, Eva is not satisfied with simply seeing something and ignoring or removing it (“sweeping it up”). She wants to get to the source, to know the facts behind an event. As I come to know Eva from our interviews, I begin to share her appreciation of her “different” way of thinking and behaving.

Eva’s friendship with Tamara, she says, has “matured” over the past few years. When she and her friend fought last year, they would retreat from each other and think “I don’t need that. I don’t need no friends.” Presently, however, they work it out together, staying up late at night discussing the reasons for their fights. Like many of her female peers, Eva has come to believe that disagreements are not threatening to her friendships but a regular part of them. Further on in the interview, Eva has a similar discussion about arguing with her family members:

You know, you always argue with your family but that don’t mean you don’t care about them. So, it’s always, you gotta have disagreements in a relationship, happiness comes along with it. But in order to have happiness, you also have to have a quarrel.

Okay, why do you think that?

’Cause just like good and bad. You couldn’t have a good unless you started out with bad. You know what I’m saying? There has to be—sometimes I think, how can you say something is good if you don’t have nothing to compare it with?
Eva is aware of the necessity for contrasting conditions that throw both light and shadow on her feelings. She suggests that she is constantly “looking at a piece of glass” and reflecting on why it’s there in the first place (“you couldn’t have a good unless you started out with bad”). She investigates the nature of interpersonal relationships in the same manner she uses to describe her inquiries about a pencil or a piece of glass.

Eva says she has no group of friends at her school because she does not like most of the students:

*What about them do you not like?*

They act stupid [laughs]. Well, that’s my opinion. I just don’t want to get around them. ’Cause they act fake.

*What do you mean?*

Like one minute they’ll be like, “Oh, how are you doing?” and next with their friends they don’t know you or anything. I don’t like people like that.

Believing her peers will betray her, Eva chooses to stay away from them. Nevertheless, Eva has had close and supportive friendships with girls each year of her interviews. Similar to many of the girls discussed in chapter 5, Eva’s wariness of other girls does not lead her to avoid intimacy with all of her female peers.

Eva has no boyfriend this year. The boy she was interested in last year, Deshawn, distanced himself from her and she seems hurt by his behavior. Being hurt, however, is not a factor in Eva’s explanation of why she does not have a boyfriend:

*I’m not looking for no relationship. That’s just a pain in the neck.*

*What makes it a pain in the neck, do you think?*

[Sighs.] Having to worry about, “Oh, I’m going to be all lost and caught up.” And sometimes they may try to say that, you know, they’re helping you or whatever. But I think they just keep you from doing what you really want to do cause you’re young and you should keep your mind straight on what you really have to do. It’s like, you know, okay, let’s say . . . I’m on a diet, right, and my mother . . . makes a salad. With all these, you know, so I can eat because I’m on a diet. And then a boyfriend is like an ice cream sundae right there, you know. It’s just tempting you to mess up your diet
process so I’d just be like no, if you have the willpower to say no, it’s better.

Echoing a theme heard among several of the girls about the risks of marriage and of men, Eva likens having a boyfriend to cheating on a diet. Eva’s pursuit is not for a relationship with a boy, but for discipline and the achievement of her ambitions. Her lack of interest in having a boyfriend may also stem, however, from Deshawn’s rejecting behavior.

Regarding sex, Eva says she does not believe anybody should have sex until the relationship has lasted longer than a year:

’Cause when a person really really knows how you feel, it’s hard for them to hurt you ’cause they know your mother. It’s like if you had a boyfriend, and he was always coming over meeting your mother, eating dinner with your mother, with your parents or going over to his parents, it’s hard for him to hurt you ’cause he knows a part of you that nobody else really knows. . . . But if it’s just oh leave school, go over his house, have sex and all that. He don’t really know nothing about you. He can just do anything to you and he don’t care ’cause he don’t know you.

In response to a question about sex, Eva speaks about her strategies for preventing boys from hurting her. Last year, Helena’s question about sex provoked a discussion of the dangers of disease and pregnancy. This year sexual intimacy involves the possibility of hurt and abandonment. As she describes boyfriends’ “keep[ing] you from doing what you want” and boyfriends’ hurting “you,” Eva sounds more vulnerable this year.

When asked about her desire to have children, Eva says that she wants to be financially stable before she has a child so that she could take care of her child by herself or help her husband take care of their child. She is determined not to have to depend financially on anyone in the future. Like several of the girls who valued their mothers’ independence, Eva greatly values her own autonomy and wants to retain it when she has a child. Eva and her female peers commonly told us that they have learned from their mothers, aunts, sisters, and fathers not to wait for a man to take care of them, and they are uniformly determined to follow such advice.

When asked to describe herself, Eva says she is “goofy, goofy, goofy, very goofy . . . I like to laugh a lot. Anything else? No, just goofy.” Eva’s self-description has changed from last year when she said she was smart,
trusting, loyal, and full of “potential.” This year she describes herself as “goofy.” There is a self-consciousness about Eva this year that was not evident in her previous interview:

What do you like about yourself?
Uh, I don’t know. I don’t know. Hmmm. I don’t know. [Pause.] I don’t know. There’s something but I can’t think about it. Oh, what do I like about myself? That I can cook. Yeah.

What don’t you like about yourself?
Uh, I eat too much. I don’t know. I haven’t thought about that. I don’t think about myself that much.

In a dramatic shift from last year, Eva is not only reluctant to talk about herself but in fact is hard pressed to remember what she appreciates about herself. When asked what she does not like, Eva responds impulsively that she eats too much, effectively undermining what she has just said she likes about herself. In an unusual wave of awkwardness, Eva claims not to think about herself very often.

At another point in her interview, however, Eva sounds more confident:

Somehow, I just learn real fast. I don’t know how. But it’s like anything I do, I learn it real fast. Like, I didn’t know nothing about softball. I didn’t know nothing about basketball or volleyball. Somehow I just learned it. I didn’t go to, you know how they have the camp in eighth grade? I didn’t go to none of them. And I became good. I’m not trying to brag or nothing.

No, that’s okay.
I became good. And I don’t even practice [over the summer] and I’m really good.

Expressing pride in her intellectual and athletic abilities, Eva adds that she enjoys and is good at writing poetry. She writes poetry about “love,” “the environment,” and about “things that go wrong” and has successfully encouraged her friends to begin writing poetry. Unlike last year, however, Eva’s responses betray a self-conscious note (“I’m not trying to brag or anything”).
During the drug-and-alcohol-use section of the interview protocol, Eva admits to smoking cigarettes occasionally but not too often because of her involvement in sports. She says she no longer drinks unless there is a celebration, and she has not tried any illegal drugs because she is afraid they would “mess up her system.” She has not and does not anticipate getting involved in any other risky activities such as stealing or selling drugs because she feels “too good” about herself to allow it:

I don’t like stealing ’cause I see where, it don’t pay to steal. . . . I can’t stand stealing. I think it was like three weeks ago, me and Tamara went to the store and she met this boy that she knew, I think, like a long, long time ago. I was with Tamara just walking around in town, and he was all like, “Yeah, let’s go to this place.” We thought he was going shopping or whatever. And he goes in the store and steals a hat and I was like, “Tamara, why is he stealing a hat?” And she was like, “I don’t know, I don’t know.” And we left, we didn’t leave him, but we went outside the door ’cause we didn’t want nothing to do with this. And when he got out, he was all braggin’, “Yeah, I got one of these, and another one.” He had stole a whole bunch of them. I was like [thinking], “Oh man, that’s foul. . . . He was just using us as a cover.”

*Did you tell him that when he was there?*

I just rolled my eyes at him. I wouldn’t disrespect him ’cause I don’t know him, but he got the sign that, you know.

*You didn’t like that?*

Yeah, that I didn’t like that.

Angry at this boy’s behavior, Eva chooses to convey her disapproval non-verbally. A certain ambivalence is suggested, however, when Eva chooses to leave the store but wait for the boy outside. Given her pride in having an independent mind and being outspoken, her reaction to this boy is not what I would have anticipated. Eva indicates that her lack of “knowing” him caused her to silence herself (“I wouldn’t disrespect him”). However, Eva’s silence, like that of many of her female peers, may stem from the fact that the person who angered her was male. While Eva suggests that she is forthright in many of her relationships, she does not seem outspoken with boys until her senior year.
Eva is on the honor roll throughout her entire junior year and says that she does well because she “cares” about her grades:

What do you think changed it for you? Why did it become important?
I don’t know. It’s just like you wake up one day and find that you’re alive. Like you really know what you’re alive for. Waking—waking up in the morning, like, “Huh,” all happy. I don’t know. I just woke up and started doing work. Seeing how hard it is out there.

Eva explains that even though she is doing well now, she understands that there is always a risk of a downturn:

You can change like that. If you really want to do it, it’s just like that. If you want to be good, bad. But it’s easier to be bad than to be good.
What do you mean by that?
’Cause bad stuff has always surrounded you. And you have to really be strong.

Although she is immersed in a world of “bad stuff,” Eva seems to have navigated around many of these obstacles. She recognizes the ease with which one can turn from good to bad but ultimately considers such a change under her control (“You can change like that. If you really want to do it”).

Eva wants to go to college, but is particularly anxious this year about her chances of getting in:

Why is it you feel that you wouldn’t get in?
I don’t know. It’s just hard, people nowadays, like you see people all, um, like me, I see all the kids. Like when I was a freshman and they was a senior here, they used to be like, “Yeah, college, college. This and that.” As soon as they got out, they didn’t go nowhere. I see them right on the streets. I’d be like, “You ain’t started college yet?” “No, not yet. Not yet.” So it’s like I feel the same way. I’m probably just saying that now. Like, “Yeah, college this and that,” and when the time come, I’ll be all, “I don’t know, I won’t go to college.” . . . I don’t know.
You seem so motivated in so many ways. But you feel like it’ll be hard to follow through with it?
Like doing the work, no, I could do the work. I could do anything, any work.

I mean I like things that challenge me.

**So what will you do if you don’t go to college?**

Go to college. There’s no way I’m not going to college. I’m just scared.

There’s no possible way that I would not go to college.

The opening of this passage contains one of the few moments in Eva’s interview in which she voices insecurity about her ability to do what she wants in her future. Eva’s reflections on what has happened to her peers throws her future plans into question. Yet, when Helena pushes her to contemplate the consequence of not following her plans, she resists and regains her earlier confidence (“there’s no possible way . . .”). Her confidence, however, does not seem as stable as it was in her earlier interview.

Later in the interview, Eva suggests once again an insecure stance:

*How does it make you feel when you think about the future?*

Nauseous [laughs]. I don’t know. You could say I’m scared.

*What makes you scared?*

And you know, I’m scared, but I’m excited. . . .

*What do you see happening in your future?*

All I see is education. I like to write, but I don’t think I’m gonna make it as a writer. I think my profession would be teaching. And also as a second profession, maybe nursing. But then I think about it, why be a nurse when you could be a doctor? But I don’t want to work that hard.

*Do you have any particular hopes for the future?*

Yeah, I hope—I hope I live to see the future. That’s one.

*Do you have doubts about that?*

I don’t know, I’m not in any danger, but you know how things happen.

You’re never too sure of anything.

Eva repeats the hopes that she has mentioned before, but also, for the first time, hopes to “see the future.” This response offers a new angle in her discussions of the future. Although Eva mentioned earlier that she does not feel threatened as long as she stays in her own neighborhood, she suggests here that her life is always at risk, regardless of her precautions. She feels
hopeful about her future but is also acutely mindful of the unpredictability and possibility of death.

When Eva is asked what makes her life worth living this year, she says:

Life itself [laughs]. I'm just thankful for living. You’re living and you get to see another day. You get one more day to be with the people you love and care about. Living isn’t as bad as they make it, if you have morals. If you don’t, like some kids just get up, get dressed with an Uzi in their pocket, and go to school. Other people get up, look at the flowers, look at the trees, look at the birds, you know, and be thankful for what they have.

While her reference to “flowers,” “trees,” and “birds” seems a bit pat, Eva appears genuine in her response. Her statements about Uzis and “living isn’t as bad as they make it” suggest that she is aware of the violence and hopelessness around her, but she resists this hopelessness, as do most of her peers in the study, with optimism and enduring beliefs and “morals.”

Overall, Eva seems less self-confident this year than last. She questions her ability to get into college, struggles to tell Helena what she likes about herself, and answers with less elaboration than in the previous year. Even though her grades have improved and she remains a confident athlete and poet, these achievements no longer translate into the complete self-assurance and verve she displayed in her sophomore year. Her lack of self-confidence may lie, at least in part, with Deshawn’s recent rejection of her. It may also lie with her growing understanding of potential obstacles and the unpredictability of her future. Her confidence, however, all but fully reemerges in her senior-year interview.

Eva’s Senior Year

In Eva’s senior year I am her interviewer. Like Malcolm, Eva seems comfortable with the change. I meet with Eva in the small interviewing room used in all three years of the study. Wearing baggy pants, a long-sleeved blouse, gold hoops in her ears, and with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, Eva sits and looks directly at me waiting for my first question. She exudes energy and self-confidence and appears comfortable, even excited, about being interviewed. Having heard about her repeatedly from many of the teachers and students, I am already well aware that she is popular in this
school. As I watch her, I realize that I am feeling awkward and nervous. Her confidence and energy remind me of how little confidence I had at her age. I want this interview to go well. I look down at my list of questions and begin.

We start the interview by discussing the changes in her life over the past year. In the spring of her senior year, Eva was accepted and received a scholarship to the college of her choice. She will start college in the fall, and at the time of the interview she is preparing to move into the dorms. She is happy but believes that she will miss the “huge” bedroom in her mother’s house. With a sigh of relief, she remarks that her dorm is only a short train ride from home.

Eva tells me that her relationship with her mother has not changed: “We don’t get along at all.”

There’s no communication whatsoever. . . . I was happy and really thrilled ’cause I got accepted [into college]. And I wanted to share that with her. And she was like, “I don’t care.” You know, she’s not really motivated about me going to school, but it’s what I want to do so.

Why do you think she’s not motivated?

I don’t know. Maybe ’cause—all right, first of all, a mother doesn’t want her daughter leaving home at a young age. Well, you know, I’m young and everything. But I don’t think that’s it. I think that, I don’t know, with my brother, it’s like, she brags to her friends about him, but with me, she just thinks the worst of me. . . . Now, I’m the one bringing home trophies, report cards, good report cards. Accepting scholarships, I got scholarships to college. And we have our miscommunications, but mainly I just stay in my room or whatever. When I’m going out, I knock on her door and say I’m going out. I go out and come back, like that.

Feeling unappreciated and unable to communicate with her mother, Eva is not only frustrated but also hurt by her mother’s behavior, which she struggles to understand:

[My mother] is from the islands, and I don’t think that she has much respect for education. Well, you know, she encourages kids to go to school and everything, but—it’s like back there, it’s really like a whole different thing. I think she would prefer me—much rather me to get married, have kids, and
stay in the house, and be a mother figure, which is good, you know. I just
want something more than just staying in the house. Or maybe she might
even envy me. But I don’t know.

Voicing a desire that is shared by many poor immigrant adolescents, Eva
tells me that she wants “more” for herself than what her mother had (and
what her mother wants for her) and this “more” means an education and
working outside the home. In acknowledging that her mother’s desires
may stem as much from envy as from tradition, Eva recognizes, almost in
spite of herself, the complexities of both her own and her mother’s feel-
ings.

Eva says her relationship with her mother has gotten worse over the
years because she has refused to “open up” and reveal her personal life to
her. Had she been more forthcoming, she thinks, her mother might not
have been so frustrated with her. Although Eva briefly seems to assume
sole blame for the state of their relationship, when I ask her directly her re-

t
 So you really see it as more, sort of, I don’t want to say your fault, but your prob-
lem, in a way, why you guys haven’t gotten along?

It’s equal. I’m not a—I’m not an angel. But neither is she. I mean, she goes
to church and everything. And preaches righteousness. And she turns
around and does stuff that you would not expect someone who—I mean,
every night she goes to church. And she’s supposed to be so religious or
whatever. And then, I like that in her, but—

You like what in her?

Going to church and everything like that. But what I don’t like is how she
contradicts it. Like when she comes home sometimes she’ll say something
that you would not [expect]. I’m like, “Well, you go to church, and you
believe in this, and yet you’re saying that.” But I don’t say that to her, but
I’m thinking that. ’Cause everyone’s human. Nobody is perfect. But she
does it too much. Like for [example] my sister was going to church with
her. And my sister is, she—she’s like me really. And she’s like wearing
baggy jeans and sneakers. My mother’s like, “No, you’re not going to
church like that. You gotta go put on [other clothes].” And my sister’s
like, “Why? Why?” You know. It’s supposed to be God takes you as you
are or whatever. [My mother] starts preaching like that. . . . Like she’s
more into what people think of her. “Well, I don’t want you to go like
that. [Get] clean, nice and dressed and everything.” But I mean, why? The
reason I say that is because for a person who believes, okay, she is always,
you know, she’s poor and everything. . . . [She says:] “Well, people think
’cause I’m poor this and that. I don’t care. God’ll take me,” or whatever.
And then yet [she] says, you know, “Well, you have to dress nicely.”

Angry with what she perceives to be her mother’s hypocrisy, Eva finds it
particularly frustrating that her mother is not as consistent in her beliefs
and actions as Eva perceives herself to be. Eva, however, rarely chooses to
speak directly with her mother about her anger or frustration (“You be-
lieve in this, and yet you’re saying that. But I don’t say that to her, but I’m
thinking that”). When she is angry with her mother, Eva retreats to her
room. Given Eva’s general outspokenness with her friends, teachers, and
her interviewer, I am surprised that she is not more confrontational with
her mother.

Further in her interview Eva says that she is not outspoken with her
mother because she has “too much respect” for her. Eva does not, how-
ever, believe that her mother respects her:

I was in the papers a lot this year for basketball and volleyball. And it’s like,
my uncle came by and the first thing he says: “Oh, you seen your picture
in the paper?”

*Your picture was in the paper?*

Yeah, we cut it out and everything. [My mother] goes, “Yeah, whatever”
[laughs]. She doesn’t really care. He showed it to her, “You seen Eva?”
She’s like, “Oh,” and that’s it.

With her voice rising and her eyes looking both angry and hurt, Eva tells
me about her mother’s lack of interest in her accomplishments. She wants
her mother to be proud of her and seems deeply pained by her mother’s
lack of overt response and encouragement.

Eva still feels good about her relationship with her father. She thinks he
“understands” her and they talk “like sisters and brothers. You know
friends, good friends.” She finds him easy to talk with because he listens to
her in ways her mother can or will not. Eva believes that she and her father
are, in fact, very similar to each other:
Like, how do you see yourself similar to your dad?

Oh, he’s really funny. I like to joke around too. . . . There was a time where it was me and my mother and . . . she was like, “Why don’t you go cook the food?” Like that. I’m like, “I’m doing my homework. I gotta do this.” And she was like, “What are you gonna do when you get married to your husband?” And I was like, “First of all, I’m gonna come home and he’s gonna have the food ready for me.” And she was like, “Yeah, right.” She got mad. She thought I was being smart. And my father said, “No, that’s right. That’s good, don’t sit around waiting for a man to take care of you.” And me and him, we think the same way.

Eva identifies with her father not only because of his humor, but also, strikingly, because of his similar views concerning how she should behave with men. She resists her mother’s more traditional expectations and seeks to be the modern woman whom her father encourages her to be.

She does not, however, approve of her father’s behavior with her mother:

What are things that you can think about with your father that you don’t like?

I don’t like the fact that, um, I don’t know, like he dates—goes out on dates and stuff. . . . I think he just be messing with my mother when he talks, when he be like, “Yeah, I went on a date.” . . . And he’d just say that just to make her [jealous]. I don’t like that. I don’t like the way she lets him do that to her. But you know, if I say anything, it ain’t my business. It’s like, “Dag, man, you know, you cook for him, you clean for him, you do all that for him.” If that was me and my boyfriend was acting like that, I would be like, “See ya,” you know. I wouldn’t be doing. . . . Well, that’s because she’s been married to him almost all her life probably. She has like six kids by him. You know I can understand a little bit. But some of the stuff he says—he’d be joking around, but I wouldn’t let jokes like that go by. If I were her, I’d get on him.

Although upset with her mother for not standing up for herself with her father, Eva is nevertheless protective of her and wants her father to stop making her mother’s life so difficult. In a rare moment of sympathy for her mother, Eva justifies her mother’s behavior based on the context of her parents’ long-term relationship. While Eva presents a fairly one-sided
image of her relationships with her parents in the first two years of her interviews, her representations this year seem more three-dimensional and include feelings of anger, frustration, compassion, and understanding. Her descriptions seem more mature.

When I ask Eva about her friendships, she tells me about her three best friends this year: one is her boyfriend and the other two are the same two girls she spoke about in previous years. What she likes about her girlfriends is that they are “real, not fake.” “Fake” people, she explains, are people who “say one thing and do the other . . . hypocrites, like.” Eva disapproves of hypocrisy, dishonesty, and inconsistency in her peers’ behaviors just as she did in her mother’s. In contrast to her mother, she considers herself and her best friends to be consistent in their beliefs and their actions.

Eva says she is drawn to her best friends because of their different perspectives:

The reason that we really got close is that they like me for my differences and I like them for their differences. . . . ’Cause I don’t know, it’s just that [Tamara] would respond in a way that would make me understand a little more better whereas Caroline she’ll flip it around and try to make me conclude to my own decision instead of really [giving her own opinion]. You know, try the little trick hints to try to make me understand things, whereas Tamara would just come and express herself and, you know, tell me what she would do or whatever. Caroline doesn’t like to do that ’cause she doesn’t like to get really involved because she feels as though if something goes wrong, she doesn’t want to be blamed. Caroline’s way of doing things make me think more. But Tamara is like different, which is good, you need both sides of it.

Eva’s remarkable ability to appreciate the shades of relationships and empathy is vividly expressed in this passage. While she identifies more with Tamara’s technique of giving advice or expressing herself, she appreciates Caroline’s more dialectical approach.

Both of Eva’s best friends are mothers, and the three of them spend a lot of time with the children. Watching her friends with their children, Eva says, has decreased her desire to have children at this point in her life. She says she will not be ready to have children for a long time: “I want to be able to educate my children. . . . If you don’t teach them, that’s why they
turn to the streets. You have to have good morals.” Eva’s strong commitment to education is once again evident and may explain, at least in part, why she has not become a mother like her best friends.

Eva’s boyfriend is (finally) Deshawn, the same boy of whom she spoke so fondly in her sophomore year. She tells me that when she was a sophomore, Deshawn did not want to be in a committed relationship (as I had suspected in listening to her sophomore-year interview), so they went their separate ways during their junior year. Recently, however, they became romantically involved, and Eva is happy about this decision:

*What do you like about the relationship?*

Uh, respect. That’s the most important. Respect. Trust. He trusts me a lot and I trust him and what else? There’s a lot of love. We talk about anything. AIDS, anything. Pregnancy, everything.

Eva adds that she also feels good about the relationship because she feels free to speak her mind with him:

Yep. I challenge any, it’s like he’s really intelligent. Smart. I mean really smart, he’s just really educated. Just because I know that, doesn’t mean I listen to every word. I challenge him. And he goes, “Well, yeah. That could be true.” And he likes that. ’Cause we challenge one another mentally, you know, like intellectually.

Unlike many of her peers and her mother, Eva appears neither timid nor nervous about speaking her mind with her male peers this year. This is also the first year she describes herself as an outspoken person. Her sense of confidence seems to be back in full force.

Eva says her sexual relationship with her boyfriend is also “really good.” “He don’t pressure me. I don’t pressure him. It just happens. It falls into place.” They always use protection because she explains that both of them have “high expectations” of themselves and do not want to be forced to alter their plans because of an unwanted pregnancy.

The people Eva says she looks up to this year are the poet Nikki Giovanni and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She finds Giovanni’s poetry inspirational and believes in Dr. King Jr.’s messages concerning the importance of education. But in addition to these public figures, Eva still looks up to her best friends because they motivate her to try her hardest in school. Her
friends, along with Giovanni and King, inspire and encourage her to over-
come the obstacles she confronts, whether in writing poetry or in doing
her schoolwork.

When asked to describe herself, Eva says:

Funny, goofy, funny, smart at times . . . I have a voice. I mean I like to be
heard.

*Are you heard?*

In most of my classes, yeah. They look to me for answers. 'Cause, you know,
I’m always trying to make a point or a statement.

*Do you think that you’ve ever had a time in your life where you haven’t felt
heard? Or do you feel like you have felt heard most of your life?*

. . . I’ve always made a strong statement.

*You always have?*

Always. Yep, always . . . I’ve always been heard.

Eva offers a perceptive and moving statement about herself. She is clearly
proud of her sense of humor, outspokenness, her unpredictability, and her
nonconformist stance. While she is one of many girls who discussed being
outspoken in and out of school, she is the only one who states that she has
always been heard by others. It is precisely this certitude that drew me to
her story.

*You know, I think a lot of girls have a hard time [with being so outspoken].*

That girl stuff gots to go.

*What do you mean?*

I don’t think of myself as a girl. I mean, it’s good being feminine, but a girl?

Nope.

*What do you mean? What don’t you like about it?*

’Cause when one hears the word “woman” or “girl” automatically, you know,
you feel inferior to a man or whatever. I’m just a human being just like an-
other.

Considering Eva’s apparent pride in who she is, I am surprised by her re-
sistance to identifying herself as a girl or a woman. Her exasperation with
“that girl stuff” seems to extend to my question as well, as if I, simply by
asking about girls, am participating in the rhetoric and belief system that
Eva refuses to accept. She does not want to be boxed or categorized, and her opposition to my question demonstrates this refusal. Following up on this, I ask:

*How would you identify yourself? Like, who is Eva?*

I don’t know. That’s a hard question. I don’t know. But it’s like most of the guys in this school they really, you know, they don’t play none of that stuff with me that they play with other girls. ’Cause they know I get on ’em. They do not like me lecturing ’em. I’ll be like, “What blah blah.” They would rather not ask the question if they knew what the response is gonna be. So you know, I was talking to a guy on the phone. . . . He [said], “Yeah, I really liked you and I asked my friend, ‘Who’s that girl?’ and he immediately said, ‘No, you don’t want to mess with her.’” [Laughs.] I was like, “What do you mean by that?” Thinking, you know, that maybe something was wrong with me. He was all, “He was just saying that you were strong and independent. And he wasn’t going for none of that.”

In response to my question, Eva initially hesitates but then moves swiftly into a description of how boys think of her and how she thinks of herself—strong, capable, and independent. Her resistance to the category “girl” was a reluctance to being equated with “the other girls” who permit boys to “play games” and who, by implication, do not share her qualities. In order for Eva to maintain her sense of who she is, she distances herself from the collective “girl.”

When I ask her about the source of her strength, she says:

It’s basically self-motivation. Because, I want to succeed. I don’t mean just like, “Oh yeah, make crazy dough.” You know, and jet or leave out of here. I want to contribute to my community. Like, you hear a lot of people say that. But they just say that ’cause people want to hear it. I mean, I really feel that and I want to do that. Around my neighborhood I see a lot of baseheads and junk and everything. And I have little sisters which, you know, they do well in school except for the older one. She’s really like boy-crazy or whatever. But, I just want to have a good life and not have to worry about this. But yet I want to make a difference in the black community. Like I live around [a neighborhood with a predominantly black population]. I want to get through to other people, other kids, like minorities like myself and stuff like that.
In a voice brimming with passion, Eva reveals her individual and communal spirit. She strives for individual success but also wants to give back to her community: “What do you think of when you think of your future? Well, school and education, just school and education. And bringing something back [to my community].” Her individual and collective values are evident throughout her interviews. She is proud of being a “black woman” yet she refuses to identify with the collective “girl” or “woman” because, she claims, it erases her individuality. She attributes her strength to “self-motivation” yet this motivation leads her back to her community. The way Eva braids her values together is unique among the adolescents in this study.

Feeling nervous about college, Eva says that she has decided not to play sports during her freshman year in college so she can focus on her schoolwork. What may be “strange” about her new school, she tells me, is that she may be one of only a handful of minority students. This does not “really” bother her, she says, because she will be close to the city where all her friends live.

Are you nervous about how well you’ll do?

Yeah, definitely. No, I know. . . . Nothing is really hard, a challenge, like working with computers or whatever. I mean, if you first go into a corporate office or something, and you applied for a job and it’s your first day, and you really don’t have any training. Once someone takes you and trains you it becomes easy for you. So I believe that, you know, nothing is really hard as long as you really try to do it or you want to do it. But if I’m being lazy, and I’m like, oh, I don’t want to do this. Then I won’t do it.

Tentative but self-assured, Eva believes she will learn what is expected of her when she gets to college. In fact, she says, “Truthfully, all I want is to learn in life. Profession-wise I did say I want to be a teacher. What with becoming a teacher you also learn. So it’s an education all the way.”

When I ask Eva what she fears most about the future, she answers,

I fear becoming someone that is not heard.

Why?

’Cause I believe too many people, black people mainly, are not being heard.

You know, they’re turning the “well nobody’s listening to me” into “I must
be a nobody,” you know, turning to crack, drugs, or whatever. I don’t
want to be like that. I can’t stand baseheads. . . . When I see them in the
streets, man—and when my little sister’s walking with me—I hate that.

Perceptive to the injustices in the world, Eva draws a disturbing and un-
doubtedly real connection between society’s indifference toward black
people and black people’s responses to this apathy. When I press her to tell
me whether she really thinks that she will not be heard, she says, with a
laugh, “I doubt it”:

Truthfully, I’m the type of person they need in the presidency.
Why do you say that?
Because I would not try to put a lot of pressure on myself just because I’m
the president. I would look towards the people to help me become a good
person as well as helping the country become a good country. Instead of
just, “Oh, yeah, I’m the president. I’ll make all the big moves.” I would
want more people to be heard.

The importance of community, of listening, and of being heard is once
again underscored by Eva in this insightful spin on being president.
When asked about society, Eva says:

Like, I believe not all people but some people that are in high positions really
don’t want kids like us to succeed. ’Cause if they did, look at this school,
look at our facilities. You know what I’m saying? The corporations . . . the
people who work there are like forty, fifty, ready for retirement. And who’s
gonna take care of your business when you’re gone? You should really be
thinking, you know.

Why do you think the corporations don’t hire the kids?
Well, first of all, I think like minorities have it bad. Blacks and Hispanics and
all that. . . .

Do you think it’s sort of another sign of racism in the society?
Oh, crazy racism. I mean, you have people that don’t even know they’re racist
that are racist.

Looking directly at me, Eva tells me—potentially one of the people who
work in the “corporations” (“who’s gonna take care of your business when
you’re gone?”)—about the state of the work world. As she has done throughout her senior-year interview, Eva reveals her outspoken and honest voice.

At the end of her interview, Eva says that she is passionate about poetry:

Through reading their books—like Langston Hughes—they had motivation which I find in myself. You know, motivation sometimes directs you to write or do something constructive. I feel the poetry. I feel some of the motivation that they have when they write. It’s like I can feel what they felt.

*Do you feel there’s a certain kind of experience that you can relate to?*

It’s an experience. . . . I mean black people have, I mean, although they don’t know it they have the same feelings inside of ’em. Sometimes they hide it, but like you can read a book maybe Alex Haley wrote and he expressed some type of feeling of aggression or something . . . and then, you know, you’re like: “Well, that was in 1960, 1950, or slavery time whatever, I don’t know. I’m here now. You know I don’t feel that.” But it’s in you.

It’s in you.

*So you feel like there’s a connection in the black community?*

Yeah, a connection.

Through her poetry, Eva experiences a bond with her black community. However, as she suggested in earlier parts of her interview, Eva also describes how her experiences and feelings are different from others in her community:

I’m proud to be black and everything. But, um, I’m aware of you know, racist acts and racist things that are happening in the world, but I use that as no excuse, you know. I feel as though I can succeed. . . . I just know that I’m not gonna let [racism] stop me. . . . Being black is good. I’m proud to be black but you also gotta face reality. And what’s going on, you know, black people are not really getting anywhere in life, but I know I will and I don’t know—I just know I will. Well, I’m determined to . . . and with God’s help, you can’t go wrong.

Eva’s determination, frustration, and outspokenness tumble together in this passage as she emphasizes that she is a proud member of the black community but also an outspoken individual who will not let the state of
her community (her perception of it) obstruct her desire to make a difference.

Eva ends the interview by quoting from one of the poems on which she is currently working. It is entitled “Black Child” and she says that it is a poem about herself. In the poem, a child says: “Some may say where did I get this strength from? Because I’ve been so brutally bruised, you know, raped of my history. Can’t you see the courage, the strength that I have? For today I am born, for I am a black child.”

I am moved by Eva’s story, her strength, her determination. Listening to over six hours of her interviews, I have grown to admire her creativity, her curious mind, and her complex understanding of her relationships. I am struck by her passion and her intelligence. I wonder how she is doing now, four years after she was last interviewed. As with Malcolm, I plan to recontact her in the next few years to find out.

Reflections on Malcolm and Eva

In reviewing Eva’s and Malcolm’s interviews, it became clear to me that Eva benefited from an extended support network that included female and male friends, teachers and coaches, uncles, and her father. Malcolm, in contrast, was primarily supported by his mother and a few of his teachers and had great difficulties finding supportive friends. Malcolm seemed more alone and depressed than Eva. Both of them, however, were “fighters.” Although Malcolm received little emotional support from his peers, became a teen parent, and was coping with a terminally ill sister, he eventually graduated from high school on the honor roll, attended college, and continued to be an involved father. Eva, who did not receive emotional support from her mother and continually rejected all the “bad that surrounds” her, also finished high school on the honor roll, and enrolled in the college of her choice. Malcolm and Eva both finished high school with confidence and hope.

In presenting Malcolm’s and Eva’s stories, I set out to remind the reader of the individuality of the adolescents with whom we spoke. Although occasionally I provide interpretations, my goal was not to provide analyses of their stories, but to present a detailed description of what they said to us when we sat and asked them about their lives. Like a conversation, these case studies cover a lot of ground, ramble and pause, fire up and
dwindle out. But in the half-finished sentences, the turn of a seemingly minor phrase, the repeated effort to articulate a feeling or perception accurately, the authenticity of the speaker can be felt. I wanted the reader to experience the complexity of the adolescents’ perceptions, the pulse of a life in progress, and the texture and nature of the relationship between the interviewers and the interviewees. The patterns that I describe in this book only begin to scratch the surface of the adolescents’ stories. The case studies were intended to enrich and promote our ability to see and experience the nuances of a life as well as reveal the relational nature of research.