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CHAPTER 7

Johnnie Betts on Recasting the Self

.... when I think about being Black, I'm happy, you know, I think about cool. I'm proud because we have a lot of, *lot* of famous Black people, Black stars. Black people dominate sports, Black people dominate the music industry. I like it because we have a lot of Black, intelligent, fearless leaders like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, all those guys, and you know. And I just like it because our background, you know, some you can't be proud of them and some you can. I like it because you know—a lot of people think well there's only White queens and this and that, but there's a lot of Black, beautiful African queens, you know. I like that. Queen Nefertiti and all those. I'm proud. I'm proud of my background and heritage and I could never sell out. That's what I'm proud of.
(RA27STC:1229-1260)

—Johnnie Betts,
sophomore student,
Huntington High School

It is a damp, grey morning. Tired and a bit discouraged after meetings with two soft-spoken students, I lean against a counter in the administrative area, fiddling with my tape recorder as I wait for Johnnie Betts, then a ninth grader at Huntington High School.

“Are you the person I'm supposed to talk to?” Looking up from my fiddling, I turn to meet a six-foot, barrel-chested young man. I cannot see his eyes, veiled behind dark sunglasses, but with chin raised and weight

thrust back on his heels, Johnnie looks nervous. I smile at the sunglasses and introduce myself. Johnnie nods hello, then asks, "How many times am I supposed to talk to you?" Laughing outwardly, groaning inwardly, I respond: "Four. But you don't have to talk to me at all."

I needn't have worried. Cautious of trouble, Johnnie employed a modified version of the stance he was later to describe as typical of that used by youth in the inner-city neighborhood where he spent his middle school years. Yet Johnnie's sunglasses, signifying caution, also veiled a gregarious nature and ready humor. Living up to his teachers' descriptions of a highly social youth, he was eager to talk.

Johnnie came to California from an inner-city community in St. Louis, where death, dropping out, and unemployment were far more common than school success. Interactions with teachers only confirmed Johnnie's belief that being Black in St. Louis meant certain failure: "Cause they know in St. Louis growing up as a young teen you don't do nothing no way because that's really how it is. Can't get a job. No good jobs there" (RA27STB: 1459-1463). In such an environment, attending high school and working to succeed academically were inconsistent with a pro-Black identity:

Well it ain't really cool, you know. Being Black and going to school in St. Louis really doesn't exist. like in the city, the city. Nobody goes to school. I mean cause if you do, usually everybody will cop you off and all this other stuff. They don't really focus on school, and if they do it's just to get out of high school or whatever. (RA27STC:695-697, 717-736)

Consistent with this orientation, Johnnie earned *Ds* and *Fs* through middle school and repeated his sixth-grade year.

Things are very different in California, explained Johnnie. In a school where teachers communicate high expectations and African American students see school involvement as legitimate, being Black can take on other meanings. Speaking Black English and having African American friends can go alongside doing well in school, taking pride in making the honor roll, and participating on the football team. For Johnnie, such differences have led to a fundamental recasting of self, from oppositional gang banger to "cool" schoolboy. During his ninth-grade year, Johnnie earned 3.17 and 3.33 GPAs in remedial courses and made Huntington's honor roll. In tenth grade, after moving to general track classes, he maintained a 2.17 GPA and earned district honors for his performance on Huntington's junior varsity football team. At the same time, Johnnie continued to make clear the alle-

giance he asserts to his background, in the quote that opens this chapter. At lunchtime and while in the halls, Johnnie spent time with fellow African American males, using African American English vernacular almost exclusively. He chose clothing styles preferred by his African American friends. In the classroom, he moved just far enough into mainstream American standard English and behavior to suit his various teachers. In less-structured classrooms, Johnnie blended mainstream and African American English vernacular grammatical patterns, sprinkling street slang into his conversations with friends as well.

For Johnnie, the ability to maintain and project a pro-African American identity, while adopting pro-school behaviors, has been critical to his willingness to engage academically. This chapter explores the significant speech acts and environmental conditions which have enabled Johnnie to recast himself.

WHERE IS JOHNNIE COMING FROM?

Johnnie's family and history are not contained in a single geographical area, but rather in a kinship network centered in two neighborhoods differentiated by social class and culture. Johnnie's mother, a beautician, lives in an inner-city St. Louis neighborhood with Johnnie's two brothers, twelve and thirteen years his junior. Johnnie's uncle, who works for the FBI, lives in the suburban, middle-class area that surrounds Huntington High School with his wife and three children. Both Johnnie's mother and uncle grew up in St. Louis, with Johnnie's uncle departing for college in California soon after his high school graduation.

Though in touch with his biological father, Johnnie's uncle has been the primary father figure in Johnnie's life: "... he knows me a lot man, he's always been there. Even before he was married, before he had kids, he always knew me and he's always kept me and everything, and I have been his closest nephew" (RA27STB:985-990). Johnnie has moved between California and St. Louis five times, frequently spending periods with his uncle's family. While Johnnie's movement between two households and his close relationship with his uncle might appear extraordinary, both are representative of general survival and kinship strategies employed by the African American community. African American families—particularly when money is tight—often rely heavily on friends and family in raising children and sustaining a household (Omolade, 1986; Stack, 1975).

Parental concern for education underlay at least three of Johnnie's moves to California. In early elementary school, at the end of his fourth-grade year, and during middle school, Johnnie's mother sent him to California to remove him from schools where he was doing poorly. Both Johnnie and his mother believe his uncle is better able to set and enforce rules that enable Johnnie's academic success. Johnnie explains:

.... she sent me out here because my uncle—he works for the state, he's an FBI agent, and so she thought if I came out here and stayed with a police officer or something like that—my uncle—I won't get in trouble. she wanted me to come out here because she always said if I go to California—every time I come out, I go to school, I do real good. When I go there [St. Louis] I do really bad. (RA27STA:101-106, 969-984)

While at his uncle's home, Johnnie adheres to a strict set of guidelines. For example, Johnnie is well aware that he must select his friends carefully: ".... he'll say, 'I don't like that crowd you're hanging with,' and I know I have to get rid of them. Cause if he sees me with them again I probably won't be going out for a bit" (RA27STC:1005-1009). Honesty is also key:

He knows too when I, when I'm not being straight with him. Man he'll say, if I go, 'No, no, no' he'll say, 'Johnnie, you got to be straight with me. I got to help you. I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong with you.' That's when I feel guilty not telling. He knows. Every time he's like, he's there and he'll always figure out what the situation. (RA27STB:1021-1030)

During our interviews, Johnnie spoke of being put on restriction for trying to sneak out of the house to go out with a friend, avoiding parties that might get broken up by the police, and being forced to endure lectures and housework when he became involved in a conflict with a teacher that resulted in a two-day suspension at the end of his ninth-grade year. Johnnie's aunt and uncle also call the school when he has problems with a grade, attend parent-teacher conferences, and were both present at Johnnie's suspension meeting. Both teachers and administrators at Huntington commented on Johnnie's "strong support network."

While his aunt and uncle have helped Johnnie develop the academic aspects of his new California identity, both his mother and grandmother have worked to instill pride in his African American heritage. In St. Louis, Johnnie is immersed in a community oriented toward the cultural aspects of a southern African American existence. He is expected to attend a "straight,

hard, down, bible-stomping gospel" church. (Johnnie continued to do so after arriving in California.) His grandmother, from Arkansas, often cooks foods she enjoyed during her childhood: sauerkraut, greens, pig's feet, and chitlins. His mother and grandmother speak a southern version of African American English vernacular and expect Johnnie to do so as well:

My mom, she'll tell me, if I go home and I be talking all crazy and like a White kid or something like that, she'll tell me, 'You've been hanging around too many White kids, huh?' That's what my grandmother tells me, 'You're even starting to talk like them.' I don't know, cause well we kind of like in St. Louis, everybody talks like everybody, and you really hear no proper talk [mainstream American standard English]. It's like down South. (RA27STEN:178-189)

According to Johnnie, anything that might be construed as a negative comment toward African Americans is sharply rebuked. Because many of Johnnie's girlfriends have been of Latino or European American descent, for example, his grandmother is particularly sensitive to anything Johnnie says about African American women:

If like I say something wrong, or 'She's ugly, she's ugly' my mom will say, ahm [I mean] my grandmother, 'Why you always talking about Black people? Any time any Black commercials come on you talk about them.' And she's all, 'Don't ever be ashamed. Don't ever be ashamed to be Black, cause you have some great, great ancestors.' (RA27STEN:104-112)

Much of Johnnie's positive emphasis on his African American identity and knowledge about major African American leaders appears to come from this part of his family.

In sum, Johnnie arrives at Huntington with a strong commitment to his heritage and is well aware of his family's desire for his academic success. Yet, his family's support has not always been enough to ensure this. I turn now to Johnnie's memories of his elementary and middle school experiences.

"THAT WAS THE OLD ME": THE ORIGIN AND EXPRESSION OF A "GANGBANGING" SELF

I was always getting in trouble in school. I mean, this is the best years I had ever! The best school years. I was, school, my mom used to say, 'I'll be

glad when you're out of school. Going up here every other week. Every school you go to you get kicked out of.' (RA27STEN:992-999)

—Johnnie Betts

For Johnnie, school—particularly in St. Louis—has never been easy. By the end of fourth grade, he had attended four elementary institutions. Things did not go smoothly during these early years:

Johnnie: I didn't like preschool. Go one day and you take naps and you eat graham crackers. ... And they used to spank us. And they used to spank us if we were noisy.

Interviewer: How about elementary school? What was that like for you?

Johnnie: I didn't like it either. They used to spank me too! I was always getting in trouble in school. Oh, my teachers always against me. Talking, not doing my homework, getting bad grades, not studying, not doing homework. And when someone yells at me, I get a mental block. I just black out my thoughts. (RA27STEN:976-993, 1008-1025)

According to Johnnie, things improved after his mother sent him to California, at the end of fourth grade. (Because of Johnnie's frequent moves, no elementary school record data are available.) However, in the middle of sixth grade, Johnnie returned to St. Louis because he learned his great-grandmother was dying.

Johnnie's memories of his middle school years in St. Louis center on violence, trouble, and death. (In four interviews, Johnnie associates the word *trouble* seven times and the word *death* two times with living in St. Louis.) Many of these memories are associated with Johnnie's membership in the neighborhood Crips gang, which he joined as a twelve-year-old:

Johnnie: we went to parties a lot. Stuff happened like ... we even got sent to juvenile cause it was like, that was back in the days when everything was just crazy and we didn't care. And before we realized who we were, where we were going, we were just, you know, out there, floating around.

Interviewer: Really?

Johnnie: Yeah, just gang banging and all that kind of stuff. We was downing colors and all this, but now, it's changed.

Interviewer: Can you describe to me—you know when you talk about gang banging and colors and going down to juvenile—can you give me an incident or something to help me understand what your life was like then?

Johnnie: Yeah, cause I never went to juvenile, that's the only place I stayed out of, but a lot of my friends, they always got caught and stuff. But like, when we talk about gang banging, it's like you just sit around the block and all your boys and your friends be drinking and stuff and you might see some group of kids, group of other dudes that they don't like. Could be old, young, could be anybody except like girls. But they'd just be walking by and looking at you and even if they don't look at you, one of your partners says, 'Let's get 'em man,' and they already wasted and stuff so they just rush 'em and then they take out their little rags or whatever and throw them around. (RA27STB:138–180)

Johnnie joined the gang out of a desire for protection: "... something happen, I just call my homeboy. They were like always at your back" (RA27STB: 469–471). A desire for companionship was also relevant, for without membership, Johnnie explained, "I'll just be like a loner. I would have to move to like a county and like an area instead of neighborhood" (RA27STB: 490–498). Johnnie's rationale is similar to that given by East Los Angeles gang members; toughness provides gang members with some relief from the fear omnipresent in street life, while gang camaraderie provides emotional support and a sense of responsibility as members work to earn that support (Vigil 1988; 1993).

School was not a priority during these middle school years. Johnnie and his friends rejected academics, celebrating suspensions and ostracizing peers who tried academically:

.... when I was in sixth grade down there, the teachers was all—they were strict man, they'll hit you, grab you. My teachers they hit me with a ruler and I said, I took the ruler and I broke it, and I left the class. And they were like going, 'Suspend him,' but I didn't care cause I didn't want to go no way. So it was really—when you got suspended in school in St. Louis it was like, 'Yeahhh, I got suspended!' (laughter) It was like, 'Yeah, alright!' you know. (RA27STB:1382–1400)

Kids that went to school there are like suckers man. They were stupid for going cause most of the kids who were into

school and stuff they got jumped. They got beat up or something like that. You felt sorry for them after awhile, but after awhile you got used to it. (RA27STB:1473-1480)

Johnnie's grades are in accordance with this description. He earned mostly Ds and Fs through middle school, repeating his sixth-grade year. Summing up his perspective on this experience, Johnnie emphasizes that schools in St. Louis are not places where one goes for academic learning: "In St. Louis you can go to school but you can't get a good education, cause it's like schools are, schools are death zones. You go to school, it's like, the only time you go to school is really to hang out and stay out of class and talk to everybody" (RA27STB:1323-1330). Johnnie's ninth-grade CTBS scores reflect his academic history. He scored in the 16th percentile in reading, the 27th percentile in language, and the 15th percentile in math.

In explaining his and his friends' disengagement, Johnnie speaks adamantly about the reality of the local economy and the role his teachers played in communicating its hopelessness:

Johnnie: Strict teachers in St. Louis, that's their *main* object is to tell the student that you're lower than trash, you're nothin'. Teachers here, they help you. They help you a lot. There they just like, 'Whatever ... whatever you want to do.' Cause they know in St. Louis growing up as a young teen you don't do nothing no way because that's really how it is. Can't get a job. No good jobs there.

Interviewer: How do you think that makes the students there feel toward school?

Johnnie: Like 'Ahh, the hell with it.' They don't care. (RA27STB: 1448-1469)

Again, Johnnie's descriptions are consistent with previous studies of gang involvement. Distinguishing among regular, peripheral, temporary, and situational gang members, Vigil (1988) points out the "degree of gang involvement can usually be gauged by how severe and deep-rooted the effects of racial and cultural discrimination and poverty have been on an individual, or how family and school authorities have failed to influence and guide" (p. 422).

By the end of his seventh-grade year, Johnnie's mother was sufficiently worried to arrange for his return to Mostaza. In speaking of this decision, Johnnie expresses both relief and a newfound optimism. For exam-

ple, the first thing Johnnie told me was that he came to California to get out of trouble and into school; throughout our conversations he emphasized his desire to beat the odds:

Johnnie: My thing is just to get out of high school alive.

Interviewer: When you say alive, what do you mean by that Johnnie?

Johnnie: I mean like, it's hard to go to school, to make it. Black kids, usually they drop out. A lot of them don't make it, a lot of them do. And I want to be the one of them that makes it. And a lot of them die because there's a lot of killing between Blacks and Blacks. When I say alive, I mean alive. Just that. (RA27STEN:308-312, 326-340)

Johnnie's memories of trouble, death, and academic failure in St. Louis are integral to understanding the serious manner in which he approaches academic tasks at Huntington. He did not want to return to St. Louis and felt that doing well in school and staying out of trouble were ways to prevent this.

SUCCEEDING WITHOUT SELLING OUT: JOHNNIE'S "COOL" SCHOOL SELF

.... things that I do, you can't tell that I'm kind of like a good—I get good grades. You straight out look at me you'd be like, 'Oh God! Man, this kid is ...' Cause if you see somebody that's trying to act cool or whatever, and you see somebody 'What's up?', and you see somebody like that and you see them catwalking and you're like, 'Look at that!' You can almost—you can tell by the character.

(RA27STA:629-633)

—Johnnie Betts

Johnnie's "cool" school self—the self who combines academic achievement with street-stylized behaviors which Johnnie views as appropriate to a pro-Black male identity, the self who speaks happily about making the honor roll but who criticizes African American youths who make too much effort to conform—is Johnnie's public identity, his ideal present-

tation of self. Johnnie takes pride in the fact that he succeeds without "selling out." His assertion of this self is ever-visible in his day-to-day social interactions.

It can be seen, for example, in the street-smart fashion style Johnnie has adopted. His saggy pants, dark sunglasses, gold chains, and a gold-capped incisor go alongside an athletic duffle bag stuffed with textbooks.

It can be seen in the cool nods Johnnie sends his male friends in the hallway and the jokes he makes about my presence: "Hey Johnnie, who's that?" "My mom, man."

It can be seen in the verbal jibes Johnnie casts at his African American friends, even as he participates in class. Johnnie often engaged in signifying, a type of ritual insult found particularly among males in the African American community: "Oh, you got *crowned* Jack!" "Hey, you're just about as dumb as you look, you know that?" "You don't know *none* of the answers, you just raise your hand every time."

It can be seen in the way Johnnie switches linguistic codes, as he moves to African American English vernacular grammatical patterns when engaged in social, as opposed to academic, conversation with teachers in the classroom: "Why come they're in the hall?"; "I don't know Ms. Ashton, if somebody did a murder you gonna' take everybody to jail?"; and "So, all we doin' is writin' out the word for word for simulate?"

Johnnie's "cool" school self is most visible in his English class, where he often competes with others for the attention of his teacher. Not wanting to blow the street-smart aspects of his identity, Johnnie is both serious and flippant in the way he approaches classroom tasks:

Teacher: Did anybody else want to *really* do something, but you're just too busy and can't find the time?

Johnnie: I wrote uhm, 'No, I don't think this is true because I always do, find time for what I want to do. Maybe on Verna I wouldn't because I wouldn't want to do anything but sit back and be happy.'

Donna: Oh how pretty!!

Naomi: Ohh.

Martha: Alright Johnnie.

Teacher: What are you able to find time to do specifically Johnnie, what are you able to do?

Johnnie: I don't know.

Teacher: What do you do in your spare time? If you can tell us.

Johnnie: Work, I don't know.

A.J.: Work?! Oh yeah, come on!

Teacher: What kind of work honey?

Johnnie: I don't know, just work.

Naomi: Where do you work?

Johnnie: Helpin' the old people. Want to see 'bout the ill people at the hospital.

A.J.: He lyin'. He just tryin' to make the girls feel happy for him.

Teacher: Donna, do you believe Johnnie?

Donna: No, but I think that would be something nice he could do.

Johnnie: End my life helpin' old ladies cross the street. (RA029OB5: p.9)

Johnnie is not about to publicize his job at McDonald's. Backing away from academic language, he moves into African American English vernacular and employs blatant sarcasm to avoid looking overly compliant.

For Johnnie, not "selling out" is of vital importance. He is highly critical of fellow African American youths who reject their background:

Johnnie: I'm proud. I'm proud of my background and heritage and I could never sell out. That's what I'm proud of.

Interviewer: What would be selling out Johnnie?

Johnnie: It's like you see some people around here, like they'll try—they're Black, they're Black as day. And they'll try to go around saying like—we had this one girl here who was—her father was Black and she would call you a nigger in a minute. She was half Black—her father was Black but her mom was White—so I guess she didn't like Black people. And that's what you call a sellout: somebody that is ashamed of their background. Selling out would be like leaving your own to go to somebody else's. (RA27STC:1258–1275, 1284–1286)

While Johnnie has friends in European American and Latino peer groups and dates a Filipina student, he spends most of his time with African American males who support his pro-Black orientation. He and his friends mark their identity through the kind of music they listen to, their use of African American English vernacular, the clothes they wear, and the words they use (which Johnnie describes as "street slang"):

Johnnie: it's different, cause usually when you see a White guy, he's got his pants all rolled up, and his legs are pegged, and he'll be all tight, and his pants'll be way up, and he'll have some funky disco shoes on or something like that. Some toe socks or something like that. (laughs) And then, you know, they don't expect you to dress like that. But how you dress is how you dress. We have some Black kids that dress like that, but label them as 'discos.' ... A loner.

Interviewer: Okay. So there is a definite way you're supposed to dress?

Johnnie: Dress how you want to dress is what they going to say. I mean you can dress that way, but they're going to talk about you, every Black kid in school is going to talk about you. (RA27STEN:434-460)

According to Johnnie, status is achieved through prowess on the sports field and through the development of relationships with the opposite sex. In contrast, his friends define the hostile, territorial aspects of Johnnie's St. Louis persona as antithetical to a pro-African American identity:

.... when I come back, they be like, 'Oh yeah, glad to have you back,' and they take me out and stuff and we just kick it or something like that. And they be like, 'Man Johnnie, you changed man, you changed. I remember when we used to go to school out here and you wasn't crazy like this and everything. Talking about all this crazy stuff [gangs].' And it was like, my one, I got a friend here named Tommy, and he's really cool and everything, and he was telling me too. He's all 'Man, we don't want none of that gangs bothering us, cause all it is is brothers killing brothers and it's low man. Why you going to shoot another dude that's your own color?' (RA27STB:567-597)

According to Johnnie, Huntington is characterized by low levels of conflict between ethnic and racial groups and a friendly social environment. In this context, manifestations of territorialism are incongruous with the social situation.

When I first came back, when I was a teen? I was—cause I had been in St. Louis for a long time and I was gang banging it, so I thought I was pretty bad. I came here and I was like, 'Why are all these people nice to me??!! Why?' I mean, I looked at them mean

and everything, I was mugging them and everything, I'm like, 'Why do you want to be my friend?' Okay? it was like, 'Why do you want to be my friend? I don't like you.' You know, 'I'm from a different set [a block[s] in a neighborhood associated with a particular gang]. I'm cool.' So my one friend Damian was a senior last year, and he goes, 'Well, you know, I want to be your friend, it's cool.' So that's how I—if it wasn't for him, I'd probably be a loner, I wouldn't know nobody. (RA27STC:652–664, 683–686, 669–674, quote reordered for clarity)

While African American students at Huntington can sell out by rejecting their background or dressing inappropriately, Johnnie is emphatic that academic success is not antithetical to peer group norms. While he appeared familiar with this idea, he rejected it forcefully when I suggested it as a possibility:

Interviewer: So when you do well in school, you don't feel like you're rejecting your heritage or anything like that?

Johnnie: No. I don't like it when people say that! Cause what people are trying to say is that I'm supposed to mess up, I'm not supposed to go to school and climb. I don't like it when people say that. Cause a lot of Black kids, they get like five or six scholarships. Like my uncle, he had twelve scholarships: at UCLA, [and] he had a scholarship to Miami State. And this was academic and sports. So I get offended when people say that. (RA27STEN:868–899)

During our interviews, Johnnie spoke happily of making the honor roll ("I felt great!") and of having proved what no one in his family thought possible, that is, that he could get good grades while continuing to have a good time. More indicative, he and his friends frequently discussed their academic status:

Johnnie: Well the big thing this year was how we're going to be eligible to play sports. And they'll ask me, 'Are you going to be eligible?' and I'll say, 'Yeah.' And they'll ask me and I'll say, 'I got a C.' 'You got a C? I got a B! Well like maybe you can do this, maybe you can read this paper and I'll help you and we'll start doing this to earn extra credit and she'll give you a B.' And he goes, 'Alright.' And I was telling my other friend, 'I got a C.' And he goes, 'What!? I got a D.' 'Oh man!'

Interviewer: What about last year when you were getting like straight As?

Johnnie: They—first they were amazed, they were like—well everybody wanted me to help them out, I was kind of like setting a role model for them and everything. But, this year they're setting a role model for me. Because my classes are harder. (RA27STC:888-919)

In contrast to St. Louis, where suspensions were a cause for celebration, helping one another stay in school at Huntington High is the norm: "If I get into trouble they'll help me get out, they'll do anything to keep me from getting kicked out of school" (RA27STC:837-839).

In sum, Johnnie's words and actions indicate that, in contrast to St. Louis, academic achievement is consistent with the expression of a pro-African American identity at his high school. He expresses no ambivalence about his academic achievement, no discomfort about his social status. Clearly, differences between Johnnie's peer groups in Mostaza and St. Louis are essential to his ability to add academic achievement to his identity. However, a series of actions on the part of school personnel have also been critical to Johnnie's redefinition of himself. I turn now to consider significant speech acts at Huntington High.

THE REDEFINITION OF JOHNNIE: SIGNIFICANT SPEECH ACTS AT HUNTINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit about what it's like to be a student here as opposed to St. Louis?

Johnnie: Well, first of all you get to live. Second of all, the school is better and the teachers are better. You don't have to worry about walking down the street, getting shot, or walking down the street getting gang banged, getting jumped, getting your clothes taken away. Here, you're walking and you're cool with everybody. You either settle it yourself, usually it doesn't get in a fight, or you go to a teacher and they get suspended. St. Louis, you're walking, you have a fight, you get jumped by the whole school. And here it's not like—it's better. You know? (RA27STC:627-653)

—Johnnie Betts

When I first met Johnnie, he had only good things to say about Huntington. Compared to the experiences he'd had in his St. Louis middle school, everything appeared better. Over time, as Johnnie became more aware of some of Huntington's negative aspects, he did become more critical. However, in many ways, Johnnie's ability to develop the academic aspects of his "cool" school self reflects a series of positive encounters and decisions made by school officials and teachers.

Johnnie entered the school district as an academic failure. Overage and with little to show for his years of extra schooling, Johnnie appeared as a prime candidate for eighth-grade remedial courses. Despite his record, however, Johnnie was given a "social promotion," skipping from the eighth- to ninth-grade remedial classes. (From Johnnie's description, it appears this switch was made because of his age and size.) Upon arriving at Huntington, Johnnie describes himself as being bombarded by messages from teachers in his remedial classes. Always, the expectation was that he should move upward and onward to general courses:

Interviewer: In thinking about your teachers, the ones you have now, what do they expect out of you?

Johnnie: Expect me to graduate, and to go to college, and to be something.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

Johnnie: Cause they tell us! Tell us, they say something like, 'I want you to do good this year so you can pass my class so you can go into a higher class and so you won't be back here.'
(RA27STB:1493-1507)

One year later, Johnnie's remedial teachers recommended his move to the general track. Over the course of two years, through a series of sorting decisions, Johnnie was redefined, from an overage eighth-grade middle school student to a tenth grader on the general path toward high school graduation.

Paralleling Johnnie's movement were varied institutional speech acts which served to publicize and legitimate his academic accomplishments. Once a semester, Huntington publishes a newsletter that lists students who have made the school honor roll. This letter is mailed to parents and posted in the building. Youth from honors, general, and remedial courses are not differentiated or distinguished; thus, Johnnie's name appeared alongside peers from general and advanced courses. A more formal awards assembly, open to parents, also served to mark Johnnie's new-

found academic identity. Conversations with teachers and observations indicated such publication efforts worked to inform others of his achievements:

English teacher: He was in an awards assembly where he was awarded a certificate for getting a certain grade point average. He was all dressed up. He looked wonderful, just wonderful. (RA029ST1:254–259)

Discipline principal: I know Johnnie doesn't want to go back to St. Louis. He had a real funny look on his face when we were talking about that. So there's fear. And there's also success for Johnnie. Johnnie's a smart guy. Johnnie made the honor roll. Johnnie's nobody's fool, Johnnie's unique. (RA092ST1:p.4)

Homeroom class: Students are receiving their quarterly report cards; Johnnie sits at a table with three European American girls that I do not recognize from his other classes. The sub asks the students if they want their grades. Half say yes, others scream no! Johnnie definitely wants to see his report card, and studies it closely when it arrives. Johnnie announces, "I got four Fs, a D and a C." "No, you didn't Johnnie, you're a nerd!" says a girl at the table. Johnnie laughs and smiles. "Why you say I'm a nerd?" (RA27STO1:p.17)

Teachers and administrators in the environment differed in their assessments of Johnnie's intelligence. However, the majority interviewed during Johnnie's freshman year recognized and commented on his academic success.

While sorting decisions and institutional speech acts served to redefine Johnnie's academic status in the school community, such redefinition would not have occurred if Johnnie had not responded with homework, attendance, and other manifestations of academic effort. Motivated by fear, Johnnie also linked his renewed efforts to a discourse of possibility which he perceived as permeating the school environment. On three separate occasions, Johnnie compared claims asserted by teachers in St. Louis and California, arguing that teacher exhortations and expectations functioned in his mind as significant speech acts which served to define alternative futures:

.... teachers [in St. Louis], they were like, they didn't care, they didn't care what you do and how you do it or where you end up cause they be like—some our teachers they actually tell us you

going to be nobody. And they'd—if somebody keeps telling you you're gonna' be nobody, you're going to take that in and you're going to say, 'Well damn, I'm going to be nobody. Look at my grades, they're right.' But, they don't tell you that you have a chance to make it, like they don't tell you that you have a chance to get yourself together and get on the good foot, and get on the right track. They tell you, 'You going to be nothing, you going to the streets, you're going to be working at 7-11.' You're going to be doing this and you're gonna to be doing that.

Teachers here, they do it too [warn kids that they're messing up], but they'll tell you, they'll be like, 'You can make something of yourself.' 'You don't have to do this,' 'You don't have to do that.' they don't really stress on you can't be anything. Strict teachers in St. Louis, that's their main object, to tell you that you're lower than trash, you're nothin'. Teachers here, they help you. They help you a lot. There, they just like, 'Whatever ... whatever you want to do.' (RA27STB:1395–1420, 1446–1454)

For Johnnie, such messages are significant not only because they suggest options, but also because they remind him to stay on the right track: "Every time I get in trouble I think about something that somebody already said ... cause I know I'm in trouble and I say, 'Well, she just said, 'Well don't do this' and I did it anyway.' So, therefore, I can be like, 'Well he was trying to really keep me out of trouble, he wasn't just talking mess to me,' like that" (RA27STC:459–468). Though teacher discourse and Johnnie's responses were undoubtedly buttressed by his observations of the local community, the point is such discourse appeared to shape Johnnie's perceptions of future possibilities and his subsequent motivation.

A final factor perhaps relevant to understanding Johnnie's willingness to invest in school is the relative stability of Huntington's local African American student population. While, as previously discussed, a wide achievement gap exists between Huntington's African American and European American youths (see chapter 4), African Americans tend to maintain their small representation at Huntington and to graduate in numbers consistent with their representation in the population. For example, between freshman and junior years, the percentage of African American youths in Johnnie's class cohort remained almost stable, falling from 5 to 4.8 percent. Similarly, looking at the two class cohorts which preceded Johnnie's, African American youths com-

prised, on average, 4.8 percent of their sophomore classes, and 4.6 percent of their graduating seniors classes. (Overall, as indicated in Table 2.2, the attrition of African American students from the class cohorts which preceded Johnnie's averaged 29 percent between sophomore year and graduation, compared to 23 percent for European American students.)

POWER AND IDENTITY: PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCES ON JOHNNIE'S "COOL" SCHOOL SELF

It wouldn't surprise me to see him go into a regular class and see him get a B. It depends on who he gets for a teacher, too. Diane Ingalls, who is here, is very strict. And if he happened to get in her class it would be all over for him. He couldn't handle that. If he got in someone else's class who would let him do a little bit more of what his thing is then he might do fine. He has to be in the right situation. He might end up telling Ingalls to go stick it somewhere. I wouldn't put that past him. (RA063ST1:pp.5-6)

—Social studies teacher

For the most part, Johnnie is described as being polite, highly social, and academically concerned by teachers and other adults at Huntington. In "student-centered" classrooms, where teachers work to develop relationships with students, provide one-on-one assistance, and encourage student participation, Johnnie appears especially pleasant:

English teacher: He's a very mature boy, I mean young man. I don't think of him in terms of being a boy. Very mannerly, somebody has instilled in him a lot of thank-you, and yes, ma'am, and that kind of behavior. (RA029ST1:217-223)

Life science teacher: Johnnie, very pleasant personality, both in the classroom and on the football field. He could come up with something pretty funny. Everybody really enjoyed him, and I think that was either football or the classroom. Everybody didn't appreciate his effort at times, his effort at times was from my perception not what it could have been, and that goes for both places too, in the classroom and on the football field. But he was a fun type guy. (RA057ST1:28-51)

Yet, Johnnie could look quite different in classrooms where teachers distanced themselves from students, particularly in situations where teachers demanded and exerted strict control. Highly sensitive to the ways in which adults exercise and assert power, Johnnie's "cool" school self was virtually submerged in the latter settings. In its place, a youth who looked bored, uncomfortable, and sometimes angry emerged. The way in which adults in the environment conceptualized the student-teacher relationship and exerted power were thus variables relevant to the emergence and continued existence of Johnnie's cool school self.

To illustrate this pattern, I describe Johnnie's response to two classes. The first, remedial English, represents the type of setting in which Johnnie's cool school self was often visible. Also a setting which Johnnie referred to when describing teachers who voice clear expectations for student progress, English provides a more specific portrait of speech acts and behaviors that Johnnie viewed as relevant. In the second class, pre-algebra, a different Johnnie emerged. There were no "thank-yous" or "yes, ma'ams" from the youth in this course. Pre-algebra thus illustrates some of the pedagogical factors that constrain Johnnie's ability to construct a cool school self.

Remedial English

Miss Ashton, she'll go all off on the board and she'll tell you, you know, 'If you think you can't even spell this word, think you're going to go in the English class next year?' And then she'll say well, she'll talk to you. She won't put you down. She'll talk to you and she'll go, 'Yeah, you know I love you. You know I want you to make something out of yourself, so stop messing around in class.'

(RA27STB:1526-1537)

—Johnnie Betts

Remedial English best represents a place where Johnnie's ideal school persona appeared. During the five times I observed his English class, Johnnie readily tossed out verbal definitions to vocabulary words, including "imbecile," "fidgeting," "preliminaries," and "simulate." He identified authors' uses of similes in his reading. He volunteered to read the complete sentence answers he had written as part of his short reading assignments. He was praised by his teacher for his general academic demeanor. At the same

time, Johnnie moved between African American and mainstream standard English vernaculars, frequently engaging in a series of one-line insults with his African American classmate A.J., even as he worked toward academic success.

Johnnie's teacher, Wendy Ashton, organizes her curriculum around short reading activities, which students complete themselves, and novels, some of which she reads out loud. (*Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Someone is Hiding on Alcatraz Island* are among the novels Ashton uses.) Drawing on content from reading activities, students in Ashton's class develop vocabulary lists, write short essays, and hold frequent in-class discussions in which they are pushed to develop their descriptive abilities, make inferences, and identify various writing techniques, such as a flashback. In addition, Ashton emphasizes oral participation, auditory activities, and reading for understanding, because of her belief that the way in which many classrooms are organized impedes many students' academic success. Ashton criticizes teachers who assume their students arrive with well-developed reading skills and who do little or nothing to help them become good readers: "For instance, when I started *Of Mice and Men*, this one boy, who came from another teacher to my class, said, 'Gee Ms. Ashton, you go through things.' He said, 'When we were given this book in another class,' he said, 'all we were told to do is read the book and answer the questions she gave us on ditto sheets.' That was reading" (RA029ST2:274-283).

Ashton's classroom is organized to promote interaction, both between students and between students and the teacher. Youths sit three or four to a table; the tables are arranged in a semicircle, allowing students to see one another as well as the teacher. Ashton believes it is critical to establish relationships with and between students to earn their trust and to establish a productive working atmosphere. Describing herself as student-centered, Ashton has organized time in such a way that she is able to see and visit with students. She circulates before class begins and during work periods, visiting briefly with the students who attend. She seats quieter students who tend to fade into the woodwork in the front of the room, "So I have a lot of eye contact and I can touch them every once in awhile, just briefly touch them, to make contact with them" (RA029ST2:506-509). In addition, discussions occur frequently. Rather than waiting to be called upon, students are encouraged to respond to and build on each other's comments.

The majority of Ashton's students arrive in her course because of low reading scores. In some instances, Ashton also inherits youths who "could not make it" in general courses; frequently, these students are viewed as

having behavioral problems. In general, however, while some of Ashton's students are verbal and rambunctious, she does not experience significant management difficulties. It was rare for Ashton to become angry; rarer still for her to remove a student from the classroom to spend the period in the hall. In order to achieve this balance, Ashton negotiates for attention, using affectionate teasing and humor to push students who stray from academic discourse back on track. She feels a good sense of humor and an ability to laugh with students are important to maintaining the flow in her classroom: "I think it carries me along with them. I find them funny. And they need to laugh more" (RA029ST2:492-495).

As Johnnie notes in the quote that opens this section, Ashton also pushes her students. Over five classroom periods, she pressured students who answered 'I don't know' to attempt an answer four times and to expand on their answers twenty-three times. The example below, in which Ashton encourages Johnnie to make an inference from his reading, is typical of this pattern:

Johnnie: I had trouble with number one.

Ashton: Johnnie, I want you to look at your paragraph, because the answer to that is in your paragraph. It was a hard one, but it was in your paragraph as far as how Black players differed from White players. Who owned the presses for each team?

Johnnie: Oh, okay.

Ashton: So what is the answer to that question honey?

Johnnie: Uhm, that, got to think about it. ... White people owned the press?

Ashton: And therefore what is the conclusion you can draw, if White people owned the presses? They weren't about to do what?

Johnnie: Uugh, uhm, let it out. (laughs)

Ashton: Let what out?

Johnnie: About the Black baseball players.

Ashton: How're you gonna say that in a complete sentence?

Johnnie: Uhm ...

Ashton: Why isn't there much current history about the Black baseball players?

Johnnie: Because ...

Ashton: Because?

Johnnie: Because the press was all White.

Ashton: Was owned by.

Johnnie: Oh, because the press was owned by Whites and

Reporters didn't report Black baseball leagues. (RA029ST03:p.16)

Willing to assist her students as they grapple to assemble their knowledge into more coherent understanding, Ashton does not tend to spoon-feed but rather to guide her students as they reason their way through academic problems. As Johnnie saw it, "I could understand her. I like the way she talks, she talked better to me. And she broke it down" (RA27STC:145-147). Explaining her behavior, Ashton asserts: "They're in here to learn, and I'm not going to let them—to me, I might as well let them put their head down on the table, if I let them get by with 'I don't know'" (RA029ST2:744-750). Though her students sometimes complained ("Man Ms. Ashton, you bug!"), Johnnie appeared to view Ashton's behavior as an indication of her desire for students to advance academically.

For Johnnie, who has well-developed oral skills and the desire to maintain his high-profile identity, English class appeared to be an engaging learning environment. Over the course of the five classroom sessions I observed, Johnnie volunteered sixteen answers and raised three content-related questions. He not only paid attention, but sometimes fought to participate:

[Ashton has asked the students to describe a central character from a short story they've read for homework. A.J. and Johnnie are clamoring to answer.]

Ashton: Okay, A.J. do you want to get in?

A.J.: Yea, that if he was all that warm ... junk ... he'd have a lot of friends—

Ashton: —What junk?

A.J.: Warm stuff, and all that stuff, he'd have a lot of friends, but he doesn't have no friends or nothing so I don't think he must have been.

Johnnie: Can I read what I had?

A.J.: He must be like real mean and ... Well, I mean he could be nice and everything, but I don't think he's really friendly and things.

Donna: He's lonely. He doesn't have friends.

[Naomi and Johnnie are clamoring to answer, their hands waving in the air.]

Ashton: Alright, I'd like to hear first from Naomi, then Johnnie, and then from Matt.

Naomi: Okay, I think he is a man that doesn't appreciate what he has. He's lonely and then he's also timid.

[*Naomi, A.J.*, and *Donna* begin to argue this point and *Johnnie*, losing his patience, calls again for a turn.]

Johnnie: Let me read, let me read, let me read!

[*Ashton* nods her assent.]

Johnnie: Okay, I put 'I think he's a very lonely guy. He had no friends, and he had not enough money. He probably feels like he's left out of the world. *Charlie Evans* seems like a very discouraged guy.'

Naomi: Is he making this up? Let me see that, you didn't write all that! (RA029ST05:pp.11-12)

With much classroom social interaction revolving around academic participation, *Johnnie* speaks up. Able to understand *Ashton's* explanations and wanting to be part of the class, he participates eagerly and actively.

Pre-Algebra

Johnnie's pre-algebra class presented a very different context than did his English class, and revealed a very different *Johnnie*. During the days I observed this class, *Johnnie* volunteered no answers. He often looked disengaged, doodling on notebook paper, poking at classmates, and tossing things surreptitiously at friends. He also appeared lost and confused, sometimes voicing his frustration aloud: "Three??!! How'd you get three?" "I did every one of them wrong. I got them all wrong."

Johnnie's teacher, *Denise Singer*, was young and European American. Though she declined to be interviewed, *Singer* did allow me to observe. During the days I attended, students completed warm-up drills consisting of simple algebraic problems (e.g., $x + 12y + 3x + y$), reviewed homework, listened to brief explanations of mathematical problem-solving strategies (e.g., "Solving Equations Using Two Properties"), and performed work at their seats. According to *Johnnie*, these activities were typical of general classroom practice.

Students in pre-algebra sat in rows of desks, facing forward. *Singer* generally stood at the front of the classroom, facing her students at all times and working from an overhead. Students were expected to remain silent during work periods and classroom explanations. *Singer* monitored behavior

closely, and any off-task behavior was seen as highly disruptive. During the days I observed, for example, two students were sent to the discipline principal's office because they popped their gum, two others were sent for no reason that I could discern, and another student almost made the same trip after dropping a piece of chalk loudly on the chalkboard ledge. The teacher expressed frustration with her students, who struggled with relatively simple subject matter: "You're still having problems for the reason that you're not listening" (RA27ST03:p.4). Her comment to me on the first day I attended class also indicated her frustration: "Be ready. This is a horrible class."

Relaxed and engaged in English class, the Johnnie in pre-algebra appeared to strain against behavioral constraints. For one thing, rather than focusing on the task at hand, Johnnie engaged in conduct that was clearly out of line with behavioral norms:

Singer goes to the overhead. Johnnie begins to toss a piece of chalk at the boy in front of him. He, in turn, tosses it back. They play this game stealthily, and Singer doesn't catch them.

Singer moves onto reviewing the notes she gave the students yesterday. Meanwhile, Johnnie's friend, trying to return the chalk the two of them have been tossing to its place on the chalkboard ledge, drops the chalk loudly. Singer turns around eagerly and begins to write a referral. As she bends over her desk, Johnnie puts his hands in his ears and wags them at his friend. (RA27ST04:p.3)

Secondly, Johnnie did not appear polite or respectful in this class. Rather, he expressed veiled sarcasm, disdain, and even hostility in his interactions with Singer:

The class is generally quiet as Singer turns the lights off and the overhead on. The students are supposed to work on a drill. Johnnie, however, is chatting quietly.

Singer: (rising intonation) Johnnnnie?!

Johnnie: (mimicking her tone exactly) Yeesss? (RA27ST03: p.4)

Singer is collecting homework.

Johnnie: Uh-oh, some of us didn't get it done. (RA27ST03: p.5)

Johnnie earned a B- in math and managed to remain in this class without once fully losing his temper, but the frustration that such an environment created in him was apparent. In a class Johnnie attended as a freshman,

where norms of behavior were similar, Johnnie was not so fortunate. Arriving late to that class, Johnnie was asked to sit in the back of the room. When he protested, Johnnie was further reprimanded and ordered to leave the room. According to Johnnie, he refused this request because it was cold and he had no coat. After the teacher came to the back of the room and placed a hand on his shoulder, Johnnie bristled, allegedly calling his teacher a "faggot" and demanding his teacher remove his hand. The school's discipline principal describes the incident below:

Discipline principal: Johnnie Betts, I got a referral on Johnnie Betts from a teacher that's been teaching for twenty-three years. He wrote a note that said, 'In twenty-three years,' is what he started with, 'I have never felt physically threatened as a teacher. And today I felt physically threatened. I felt that I was in jeopardy of something ill happening to me in the classroom.' So, and this guy [the teacher] is about 6'5", and he's not a guy that's easily intimidated. the credibility of this teacher is extremely high, with me anyway, and he wouldn't even write this. He's the kind of guy who never writes referrals, he handles everything himself. So it was a big deal. (RA092ST1:p.2)

Backed into a corner, Johnnie does not retreat but will assert himself even at the risk of jeopardizing his position in the school community.

The ways in which teachers wield power in their classrooms and the relationships they develop with their students affect the extent to which Johnnie can reveal the verbal, playful aspects of his "cool" school self. When these relatively well-developed aspects of Johnnie's identity become irrelevant, Johnnie becomes discouraged, bored, and less willing to take academic risks. If combined with a highly controlling environment, Johnnie may also become oppositional, struggling against attempts to control and constrain.

Given this situation, it is probably important that Johnnie encountered a contingent of teachers during his ninth-grade year, with a relatively flexible set of norms for classroom behavior. This provided Johnnie with the space necessary to develop and construct his unique classroom persona, convincing him that he could participate productively in the academic aspects of his school community. As Johnnie moved into more traditionally structured classrooms as a sophomore, he encountered a different set of conditions: students tended to work and to produce answers individually, oral participation was de-emphasized in favor of written performance, and laughter and teasing were rarely heard. In these settings, Johnnie struggled to

pay attention and frequently appeared unengaged in the task at hand; nevertheless, he continued to attend regularly, to complete his homework, and to pass his courses. I often wondered what would have happened had Johnnie moved directly into such classes as a ninth grader, when his sense of academic self had not yet emerged.

REFLECTION AND CAVEAT

Johnnie's experience offers a clear and vivid picture of how movement into a new school environment can cause a fundamental reorientation in the way in which identity is conceptualized in relationship to schooling. Johnnie's response to an environment in which he feels safe and supported and where he perceives some hope for the future serves to remind us that alienated youth might choose other options if not in a situation where doing so seems both hopeless and fruitless.

In considering Johnnie's academic transformation, it is critical to take into account the local economic situation and its probable impact on peer group norms. For example, Johnnie's academic achievement and transition to the general track were not politically charged. His African American friends did not accuse him of selling out, but rather appeared to support, even value, his academic achievements. Were the local economy not growing, were there no jobs available for high school graduates, Johnnie's peers might respond quite differently to his academic endeavors.

Still, Johnnie insisted that simple actions and words at the school level also had some influence on his transformation. Coming to his high school from an inner-city middle school in which African American youth were expected to fail, Johnnie describes the culture shock he experienced upon moving to his new environment. Much to his surprise, Johnnie found high school graduation and academic engagement expected of African American and European American youth alike. He viewed it as relevant that Huntington teachers communicate that "you have a chance to get yourself together and get on the good foot, and get on the right track." In Johnnie's case, such words were buttressed by institutional moves. By making efforts to structure Johnnie quickly into the mainstream, adults arguably communicated their belief that Johnnie could get himself together. Further, rather than belittling his academic success by disqualifying him from the honor roll because of placement in remedial courses, adults rewarded Johnnie with public recognition.

Even so, there is a disturbing underside to Johnnie's story of transformation. For one, the drop in his grade point average, as well as conversations with some of his sophomore teachers, revealed that Johnnie struggled in his transition to mainstream classrooms. His difficulties were exacerbated by the premium general track teachers placed on a narrow set of cognitive skills and behaviors. However, Johnnie's struggles also reflect his poor elementary school education and its subsequent impact on his basic academic skills. Johnnie found it difficult to take notes, for example, not knowing what to write down. Reading was also laborious. There was nothing in Huntington's environment to address this issue, save remedial classrooms, which emphasized remediation rather than acceleration. (Further, because the difficulty and amount of work required in such courses is less challenging than that which is required in general courses, remediation may actually contribute to transition problems as students fall further behind their peers.) Thus, though Johnnie was encouraged to succeed, there was little present in the environment to empower him to do so. Johnnie's frustration with this situation was reflected in his interview discourse, which became increasingly critical as his sophomore year progressed: "We got counselors here and they don't even counsel you. What are they here for? We have teachers here on the student councils and all these people here are supposed to help you and they just sit up there in their office. They don't go out and see which students are having problems. Here, like the teachers expect and they try to help everybody. So that's what's good. As far as counseling and helping out, they don't really do that" (RA27STEN:595-605; 624-628).

Equally important, because the speech acts Johnnie encountered were not oriented toward altering academic differentiation at his high school or toward the empowerment of youths of color, their long-term impact on the school in general and Johnnie's ideology in particular were limited. As noted in chapter 4, significant academic divisions between European American, African American, Latino, and Asian-descent youths are a prominent feature of Huntington's environment. Johnnie's recognition of the divisions in his environment was reflected in his discourse. On the one hand, Johnnie critiqued teachers at Huntington, whom he felt had generally lower academic expectations for African American youth. On the other hand, Johnnie argued that Asian-descent students were smarter than Mexicans and Blacks, citing as evidence his observation that "you don't cheat off a Mexican's or Black's paper" (RA52ST05:p.2).

Johnnie's beginning understanding of the links between student disengagement and local conditions offers the starting point necessary for

grounding conversations about societal divisions. Recall, for example, that Johnnie linked St. Louis teachers' low expectations to the local context: "... they know in St. Louis growing up as a young teen you don't do nothing no way because that's really how it is. No good jobs there" (RA27STB:1459–1463). However, there were no curricular opportunities for Johnnie and his classmates to build on such personal understanding and to move toward analyzing societal factors that impede the progress of people from certain groups. Indeed, discussions concerning inequality, social stratification, and the mechanisms of power were not present in Johnnie's classrooms. Thus, though Johnnie was left changed, his is the story of individual comeback and new faith in the possibilities present in the existing system, rather than one of heightened political consciousness and collective transformative effort.